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Inside this must-play for Life Is Strange fans

→REVIEWED!

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Emotional beatdowns and cowboy rodeos collide in this unmissable caper

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DRAGON'S DOGMA 2

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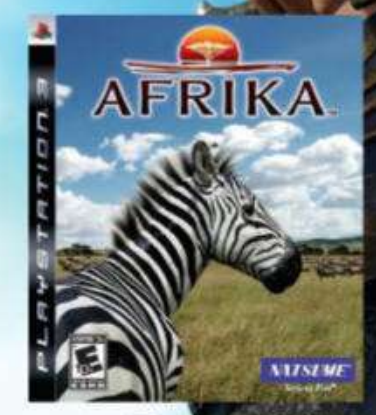

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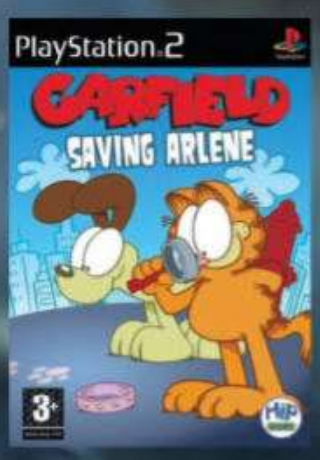

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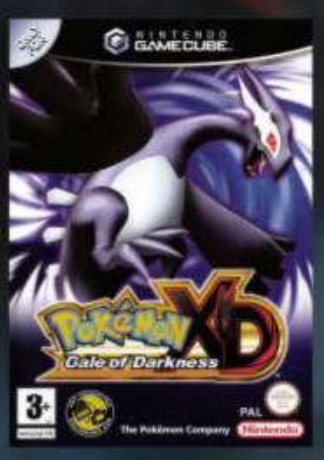

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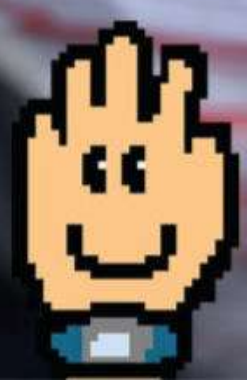

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Welcome

Greetings, dear reader, to a magazine issue of earth-shattering proportions. While we've always plenty to look forward to on PlayStation, we've gathered together excellent dives into upcoming games that you might not know a lot about yet, and have detailed looks at some new favourites to boot. Note these down!

To begin with, we have another look at Dragon's Dogma 2 (p54). While open worlds can be a bit tedious these days, DD2 is anything but thanks to a commitment to adhering to its own style, which results in some bonkers experiences and a sweeping fantasy adventure that feels like your own. Whether it's encountering bizarre, completely optional monsters or figuring out your own way to play (the Trickster class looks like little else we've seen in an action RPG) this is set to be one of 2024's most unmissable games. If there's any justice in the world, it should be a landmark moment for game design overall. We're serious about this one!

We also have a chat with Don't Nod about Lost Records: Bloom & Rage (p48), the Life Is Strange studio's spiritual successor to its breakout hit and one it's self-publishing this time. With Jusant a critical success and the upcoming Banishers impressing, it's a studio on the rise, and rightly so. As for games we already love, we talk with Alan Wake 2 composer Petri Alanko (p64) about his musical methods for crafting chills.

We've plenty of upcoming games this issue that ooze similar creative ambition. Exodus (p6), from former Mass Effect veterans, crafts a whole new sci-fi world, while Parcel Corps (p34) combines Jet Set Radio with Crazy Taxi to come up with its own innovative flavour, and Umurangi Generation (p26) inventively combines smart photo simulation with great near-future storytelling.

That's not to mention verdicts on some early 2024 GOTY contenders (p71). We hope you have a blast reading, and find something fresh to enjoy within these pages!

Oscar Taylor-Kent
EDITOR
play@futurenet.com
@MrOscarTK

GAME OF THE MONTH
Like A Dragon: Infinite Wealth
BEST TYRANT
Gortash (Baldur's Gate 3)

STAY UPDATED
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OUR WEEKLY
NEWSLETTER

THIS MONTH'S DOGMATIC ARISEN

Alan Wen
CONTRIBUTOR
With his heart stolen by a dragon (not Spyro), he's been getting his incense ready to trick goblin hordes with illusions.

GAME OF THE MONTH
LAD: Infinite Wealth
BEST TYRANT
M. Bison (Street Fighter)

Jess Kinghorn
GAMES EDITOR
She can relate to Lost Records' crew being trapped in the past, though her '90s horror is more Mr. Blobby themed.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Tekken 8
BEST TYRANT
Yotsuyu (FFXIV)

Miriam McDonald
OPERATIONS EDITOR
Mim can relate to Kasuga's attempt to help people better themselves, but jumping into a dirty river is a step too far.

GAME OF THE MONTH
LAD: Infinite Wealth
BEST TYRANT
Radovid (Witcher 3)

Milford Coppock
MANAGING ART EDITOR
Commuting to PLAY Towers on his trusty bike, Milf's more than ready to master Parcel Corps' high-speed deliveries.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Prince Of Persia: TLC
BEST TYRANT
Mr. X (Resident Evil 2)

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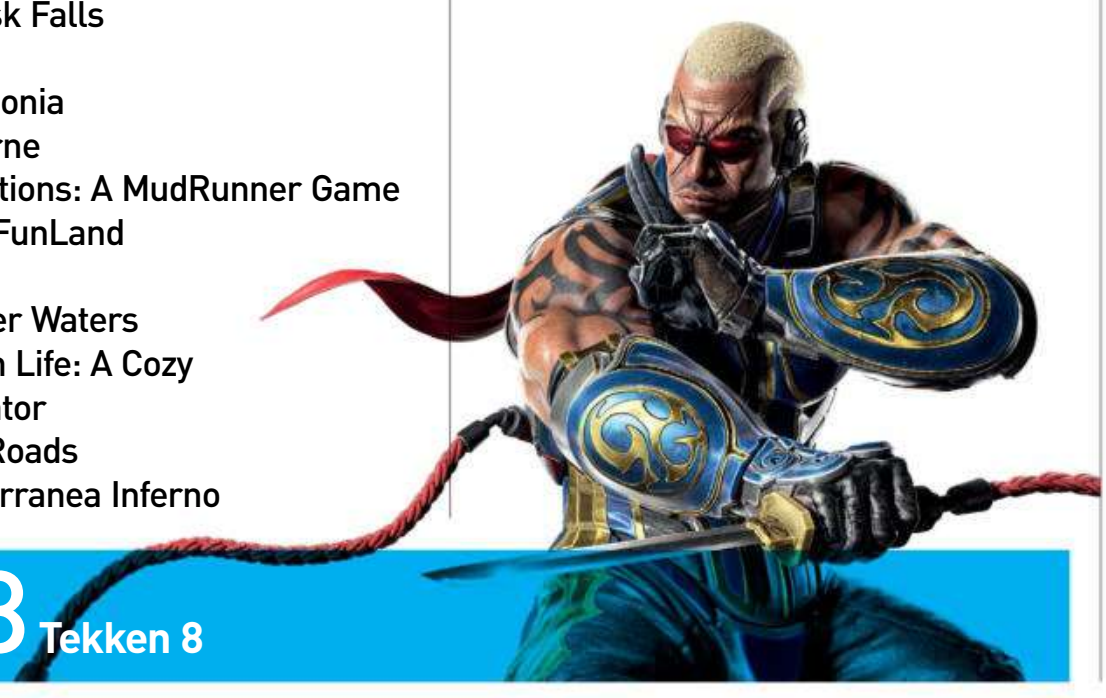

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Insider

Getting you closer to PlayStation's most exciting stories, people, and culture

We've each got decades of experience working on some of the biggest RPGs in our history.

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Elder Scrolls Online's shiny new expansion

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Llamasoft retro collection to launch

Exodus' galaxy is a sprawling one, but not a random one: Archetype says it's crafting a setting tied deeply into its story.

RPG legends reunite for Exodus

Bioware veterans taking one giant leap for RPGs with their massive sci-fi adventure

Looking at the team behind Exodus, it's hard not feel excited. When we check in with them before the game is revealed to us, we're introduced to RPG royalty in the form of James Ohlen. A 20-year veteran of Bioware, Ohlen lent his talent to both of the original Baldur's Gate games and helped bring the likes of Neverwinter Nights, Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic, Dragon Age, and Jade Empire to life. And he's just the headliner.

Exodus is the first game to be announced by Archetype Entertainment, a new studio headed by three former Bioware developers. Ohlen is studio head and executive creative director, but he's joined as co-founder by general manager Chad Robertson and game director Chris King. As Robertson explains, however, the developers at Archetype have played a part in creating an impressive range of titles.

"We've each got decades of experience working on some of the biggest RPGs in our history," he tells us. "And what we're doing with Exodus is adding to that." Obviously Bioware is an influence, then, but members of the team have also worked at Naughty Dog and Halo developer 343. Their experience in creating action adventures and sci-fi shooters at those studios naturally has an impact on the game too.

TO BOLDLY GO

We immediately sense a kinship between Exodus and Bioware's output. In our presentation we're shown a trailer of a museum curator documenting the life of Maxine Trent, an explorer who, in her efforts to save a human race that has fled Earth, discovers technology that catapults us into the future. The artefacts she uncovers seem fairly standard futuristic fare, but Exodus' narrative hinges on something a little more academic. Trent and her companion unlock the secrets of near-light-speed space travel, which they use to travel to distant stars to recover other powerful alien objects to aid our species. "But there's a catch," Robertson tells us: "Time dilation."

> **At near light speed, time for you moves more slowly than it does for people back at home.**

With time dilation, Exodus leans into a harder kind of science-fiction. We won't get into the complexities, but Robertson explains the game "honours Einstein's special theory of relativity – when you travel near light speed, time for you moves more slowly than it does for people back at home. In the case of our game, days for you means years for your loved ones." If you've seen Christopher Nolan's 2016 movie Interstellar, you'll have the gist of it.

For Ohlen, whose previous games were built around player decisions, time dilation

The events that took place before Exodus turned a struggling frontier world into an intergalactic power.

WHO'S WHO?
The founding trio are James Ohlen, who helped with everything Bioware-shaped from Baldur's Gate to Anthem, Chad Robertson, who brought Star Wars: The Old Republic to life, and Saints Row and Halo veteran Chris King, who also worked on Anthem.

offers the chance to take that emphasis on picking your own path and experiencing the consequences to the next level. As he explains: "We love making games where you make choices, but usually those choices are only 'You get to see what happens in the next few days or months.'" It's rare for game narratives to span more than a few weeks, so in most of them the long-term effects of your decision might never be felt. In Exodus, however, "You're going to be able to see what happens in the next few months, years, decades, and even centuries. It's a chance to show how your choices are impacting your world and civilisation."

ROLE-PLAYING GEM

Space travel's not the only element of classic science fiction to feature in Exodus. Between them, Ohlen and Robertson outline the other core RPG facets that their game will focus on: Indiana Jones-style exploration, which will take you to exotic alien locations; combat, driven by those 343 developers, who Ohlen says are responsible for some of "the most amazing second-to-second combat and movement" around; progression, linked to a mysterious weapon known as Orion's Gauntlet, which you'll upgrade over the course of the game; and companions, brought to life thanks to that industry-leading Naughty Dog experience, and a team that "understands cinematics better than anybody in the industry."

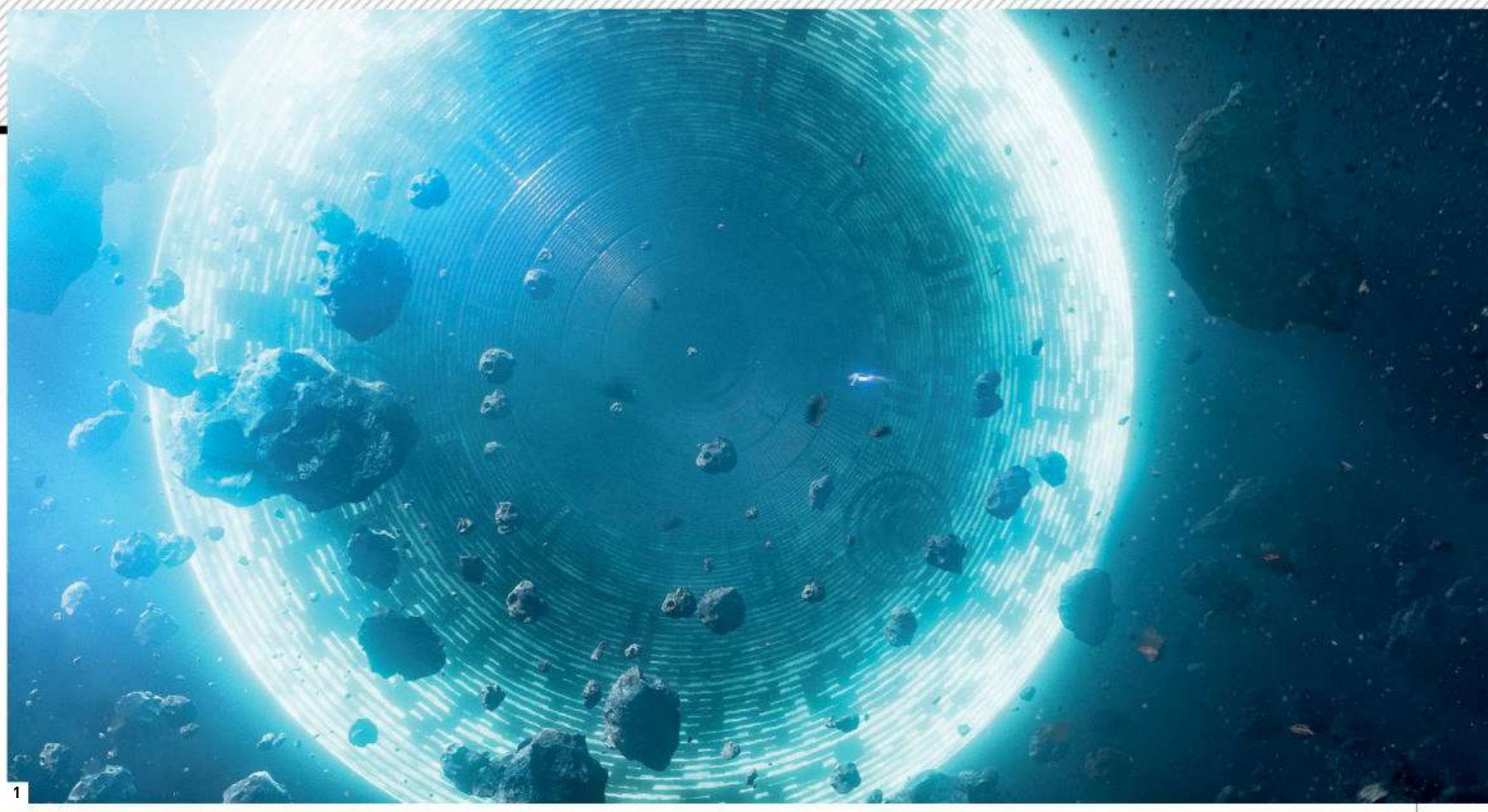
Those companions are what interest us the most – as last year's Baldur's Gate showed, sometimes the treasure really *is* the friends you make along the way. (And what makes a game a hit with players.) The team aren't quite ready to share much about them in detail, but we're shown some truly otherworldly-looking aliens. It brings Mass Effect back to our minds once again – Archetype is clearly not shunning the influence of Bioware's beloved series; Exodus' developers are paying similar attention to the forces that drive its galaxy, and aren't afraid to embrace the absurdity of those earlier games either.

As the presentation draws to an end, we ask Ohlen about currently-popular science-fiction RPGs, including Bethesda's Starfield over at Xbox. He reminds us of the Bioware experience that's going into this game: "We're a different kind of game [to Starfield]," he tells us. "We're much more similar to the games that were built on in the past. We still want to create this horizon where you feel you can go anywhere you want to, but at the same time we want to have a story that's cohesive, with characters you can love or hate and with arcs that are compelling. And so it's all about balance. And if you look at the kinds of games we've made in the past, you can probably guess where the balance is going to be in terms of this game." We can guess – and time is going to move awfully slowly for us while we wait for Exodus to arrive.

*** Ready to go back to the future of RPGs? Tell us at PLAY@futurenet.com**

You're going to be able to see what happens in the next few months, years, decades, and even centuries.

Who's this robotic alien foe? We can only geth...



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5

1 These gates enable travellers to hit near light speed, but the faster you go, the more slowly you move through time – with massive repercussions for those left behind. **2** Light-speed travel requires a suitable set of wings... **3** ...But not everyone is keen for you to take them with you. **4** The mysteries uncovered in the distant corners of the galaxy proved key for humanity's survival. **5** Einstein's special theory of relativity underpins this sci-fi RPG, but the short version is that it's wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey... stuff

STUDYING THE BRUSH
More was revealed about fellow MMORPG Final Fantasy XIV's upcoming Dawntrail expansion, including two extra jobs to join Viper. Pictomancer allows you to take your arts degree into battle, while Beastmaster will be added later on.

Ixnay from the TK
Oscar unpacks the latest goss

Last year was a tough one for game developers, with **Spider-Man** dev **Insomniac** taking a particularly rough hit when malicious hackers followed through on a blackmail threat, revealing not only tonnes of work-in-progress assets but confidential employee information. Given how riled some gaming 'fans' online can become about small changes to, say, Mary-Jane Watson's face, having things like bank details and your address released publicly can be a really scary thing. (As someone who has dared to give Sonic games low scores, I'd know).

Situations like this can be difficult to report on. For instance, if Insomniac's schedule through to 2030 is out there, we can't exactly speculate on what the studio's up to, can we? To summarise, Spider-Man and **Wolverine** seem to be just the start of a lengthy Marvel-PlayStation partnership, while at the same time big blockbuster budgets promise to bite even the most successful.

Always believe in

Elder Scrolls Online treads the Gold Road for its tenth anniversary expansion

Uh-oh – have we printed a page from Country Life by mistake?

Finished The Elder Scrolls Online's last expansion? It left some big questions, in the shape of a Daedric Prince, Ithelia, who's never been seen before. That's a big deal when you consider this MMORPG is set thousands of years before the solo RPGs. Just what happened to her? That's the golden question.

And one that promises to have a golden answer. The Gold Road is set within the expansive West Weald countryside (TES IV: Oblivion-heads will perk up at that), and will have you exploring some truly beautiful locations basking in an eternal autumnal golden glow. It's the perfect backdrop to Ithelia's journey as she travels parallel to your adventurer, regaining her lost memories as she goes; her theming is all "crystal and colour," creative director Rich Lambert tells us as he shows us the character concept art for her.

LEAF OFF

You and Ithelia aren't the only ones drawn to the West Weald. Wood elves are searching for a place to build their nation and, working together with the mysterious Recollection, jungle magics have taken hold, meaning tropical climes clash with the more traditional wildwoods we know, making for a fun contrast. While a prologue will lead into the chaos that's to come, the expansion itself will bring three new biomes in total: the Gold Road itself, plus the Valenwood Annexation and the Colovian Highlands.

There are plenty of playful links between the ancient Elder Scrolls world of the past and its future, then. But perhaps even more playful is Scribing, this expansion's big new feature, which is billed as the in-universe precursor to Spellcrafting. As it's not locked to any one class, anyone with the expansion will be able to tinker with their abilities.

Gold Road is an ambitious update, with Lambert warning us that what he shows us is still work in progress. Not only will you be able to use Scribing to alter things like the colour of your magic, you can use it to create your own moves by combining grimoires, scripts, and inks. In the example we're shown, a vault move where you blast an arrow at the ground and get lifted into the air gains a venomous attribute, as well as making nearby enemies gain a stack of vulnerability while simultaneously giving you the Hawkeye buff. Far from running out of steam, as ESO enters its tenth year, there's more fun to be had in Tamriel than ever before.

The Elder Scrolls Online: Gold Road releases on PlayStation on 18 June.

Carrying the torch

No Man's Sky dev announces procedurally generated fantasy

Guildford-based developer Hello Games has always dreamed big – for better and worse. Initially overpromising with 2016's No Man's Sky, the studio has gone on not only to find an audience for its procedurally generated universe but also to make good on many of its prerelease commitments. And now it's turning its hand to creating a fantasy realm.

Light No Fire will be set in a procedurally generated open world roughly the size of our Earth (and to be fair, a single planet may be a darn sight more deliverable than an explorable sky full of stars). It's a stage set-dressed with lush biomes and fantastical beasts. Traipsing across the landscape on foot or flying overhead on the back of a winged steed, there's a land of lore to uncover.

Hello Games hasn't revealed much about Light No Fire's story, aside from the fact you're not the traditional hero of this tale. As this is a multiplayer adventure incorporating survival mechanics in addition to roleplaying, you're invited to craft your own legend – often literally. Once you've harvested enough resources, whatever structures you build are persistent, allowing players to create their own communities if they choose. You can stay and see what springs up around your initial awkward attempts to get to grips with the crafting mechanics, or set off to explore a realm without boundaries.

You'll be able to take it all in solo, or playing with your friends, or beside complete strangers online... at some point in the future. No release window has yet been announced, and for such an undeniably ambitious vision that's probably a good thing.

Light No Fire will be set in a procedurally generated open world roughly the size of our Earth.

*** Light No Fire is early in development. Find out more at lightnofire.com**

Telling no tales? Explore, craft, and survive together or alone in Light No Fire.

THE BIG SHOT

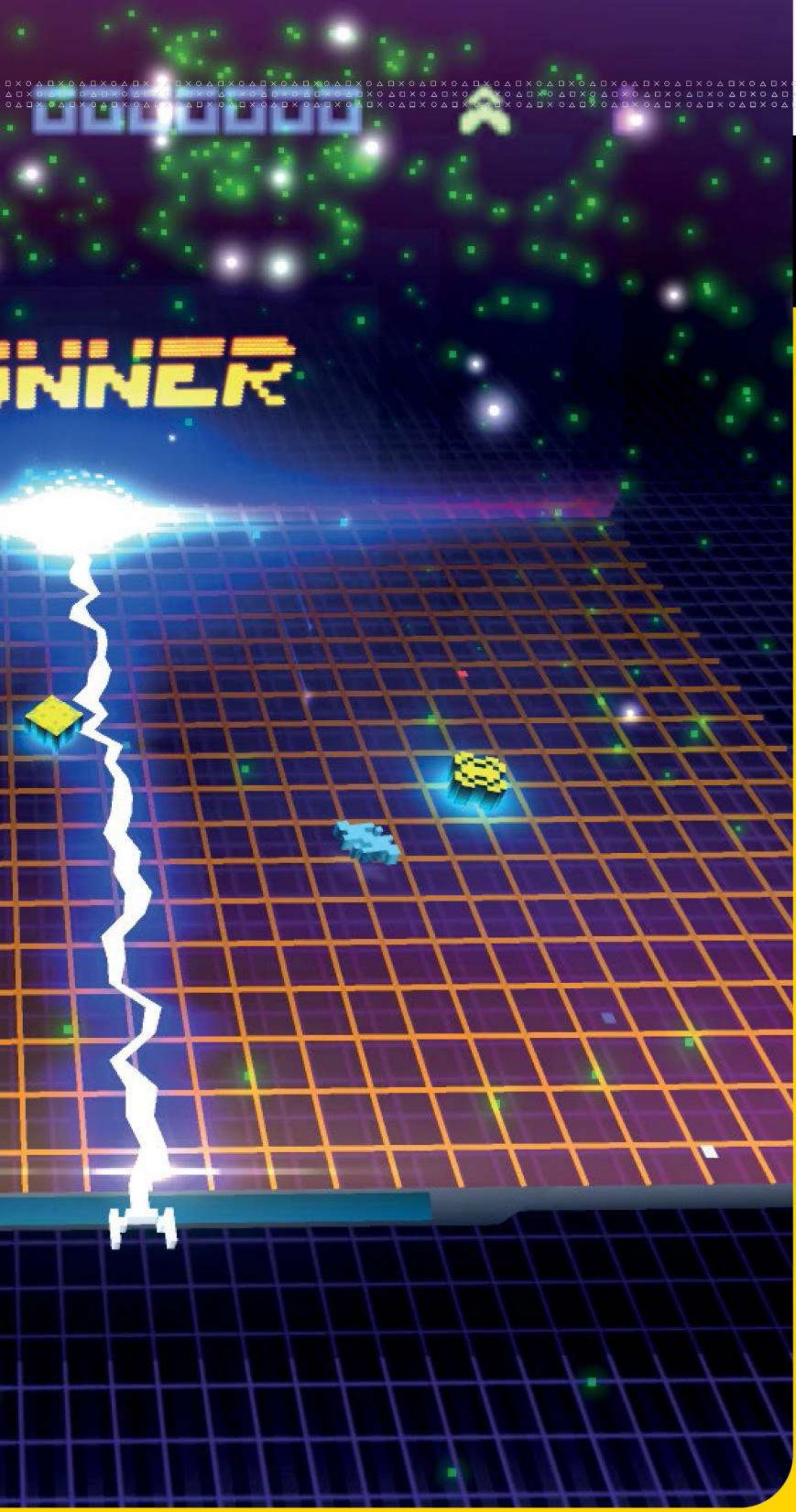
No llama left behind

Digital Eclipse's latest highlights the work of a UK industry legend

Even for us on a UK-based mag, it can be easy to lose sight of the gaming history that originated on these very shores. To help put things back in perspective, Digital Eclipse is putting together a retro collection for PS5 and PS4 that delves into the early games by one notable homegrown talent still working in the industry today.

Llamasoft: The Jeff Minter Story offers an interactive timeline that collates 42 of the prolific solo developer's games released throughout the '80s and '90s, capped off by Tempest 2000 and a reimagining-meets-remaster of Gridrunner. In addition to this fully playable library, a slew of archival material from zines to design documents is included, plus more than an hour of video featurettes from Paul Docherty, the director of Heart Of Neon (an upcoming documentary film exploring Minter's story).

Even if you don't remember the Commodore 64 or ZX Spectrum era, this is a treasure trove. In fact, one of the titles included here was initially developed for a console that was never released; Attack Of The Mutant Camels '89 was built for the cancelled Konix Multi System – and, if nothing else, further clues you into Minter's particular sense of humour.



Numbers Game

We do the maths

3,671

Days: the time Dark Souls 2's PS3 multiplayer will have been online between its 2014 release and the server shutdown on 31 March 2024.

22cm

The height of Kotobukiya's figure of Elizabeth from Persona 3 Reload. Elegant, and available for preorder.

01

Week is all that's in it between how quickly a staggering 50 million units of PS5 and PS4 were shipped. PS4 was the faster-selling console.

18,999

Pennies for the South Park: Snow Day! PS5 collector's edition – snow globe, beanie, and talking toilet paper holder (yes, really) included.

3,900,000

Copies (at least) of Ratchet & Clank: A Rift Apart have shipped since its debut.

192

Pages of mouth-watering morsels in The Official Horizon Cookbook: Tastes Of The Seven Tribes. D'you reckon they're rich in iron?

GEAR: STUFF WE LOVE

Get your groove on with the best vinyl

PERSONA 3 PORTABLE VINYL SOUNDTRACK

IAM8BIT $31.99 IAM8BIT.COM

Pretty in pink and up for preorder, this record features ten tracks from Persona 3 Portable. As you may have sussed from the gorgeous album art by Drew Wise, this selection features songs exclusive to the female protagonist route, including vocal track A Way Of Life and battle theme Wiping All Out.

BOMB RUSH CYBERFUNK 3XLP

IAM8BIT $59.99 IAM8BIT.COM

This preorderable set features funky fresh beats by heavy hitters Hideki Naganuma, Knxwledge, Klaus Veen, and 2 Mello. It's shipping in the first quarter of 2024, so you'll need to get your skates on if you want to scoop this up. Featuring over 30 tracks, the three-LP set should offer plenty of energetic inspiration for any writer within earshot.

METAL GEAR SOLID – ORIGINAL VIDEO GAME SOUNDTRACK 2XLP

MONDO $35 MONDOSHOP.COM

If you've had the Alert Theme in your head since '99, this two-LP set printed on 80g green smoke vinyl may exorcise the earworm. Featuring not only fresh artwork by Randy Ortiz but also the gutting vocal theme The Best Is Yet To Come, this is the perfect complement to your next mission-planning sesh.

SILENT HILL 4: THE ROOM – ORIGINAL VIDEO GAME SOUNDTRACK 2XLP

MONDO $35 MONDOSHOP.COM

Artists Ashley Swidowski and Nephemolancer have outdone themselves. We can't say no to this two-LP set adorned in extremely metal art. It's just as much a visual treat once you open the slipcase – it'll see you Traversing The Portals Of Reality in style.

CASTLES IN THE SKY

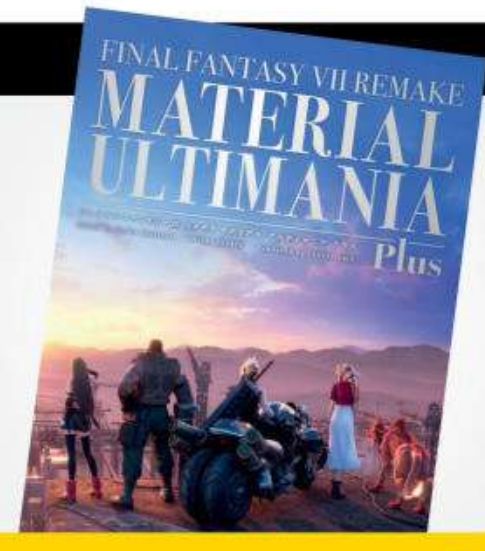
This gorgeous figure of Genshin Impact's Fischl can be preordered ahead of its 2025 release date from dekaianime.com. But with a nearly 300-quid price tag, it may well remain a dream for most of us.

'Tis the season for cuddling – so send a hint with this 1 **Final Fantasy XVI Torgal puppy plush** (£29.99, gb.store.square-enix-games.com). But what if your 'bestie' wants more? Then there's this 2 **Hades Cerberus plush** (€38, fangamer.eu). They're more of a cat person? Try the 3 **Stray and B-12 plush set** (TBC, fangamer.eu). 'Ah,' you say, 'but they have allergies.' Robots like this adorable 4 **Astro Bot plush** (€38, fangamer.eu) won't make them sneeze! Poseable, and full of sass, this 5 **The World Ends With You Mr Mew action plush** (£22.99, gb.store.square-enix-games.com) might get the message across this Valentine's Day... though a note carried by a knitted 6 **Moogle** (£19.99, gb.store.square-enix-games.com) will be more direct.

JESS'S REAL DEAL

As you may have noticed, I've got Final Fantasy fever ahead of the release of Final Fantasy VII Rebirth on 29 February. The original Final Fantasy VII Remake: Material Ultimania came out a few years back, stuffed with glossy art and interesting titbits hinting at turns yet to come on the unknown journey. Plus offers another packed volume, as well as development material from Intergrade and Intermission, alongside a fresh interview with game director Motomu Toriyama. These 224 pages are beautifully presented and jam-packed – the Avalanche aficionado in your life will love it.

Preorder Final Fantasy VII Remake: Material Ultimania Plus for £29.99 from gb.store.square-enix-games.com



DEBATE

Is wanting to own games getting a bit old-fashioned?

Subscription services tweaked, games delisted, and more – is owning a thing of the past?

MIRIAM MCDONALD
PRODUCTION EDITOR

"WE ARE NOT MERELY CONSUMERS."

This is a really complex topic; I came up with so many answers. But it boils down to this: if game companies see people owning games as old-fashioned, what does that say about their attitude towards making games for players? It suggests to me that they're no longer concerned with making something memorable, something players engage with and want to hold on to, and more concerned with selling a constant stream of 'content', the 21st century's artistic Soylent Green. No, wanting to own games is not old-fashioned, any more than wanting games to be worth owning. ■

MILFORD COPPOCK
MANAGING ART EDITOR

"BE IT GAMES, VINYL, OR MAGAZINES, I LOVE THE IDEA OF OWNERSHIP."

Admittedly, my house is bulging at the seams with records, games, and magazines, but I love physical media and holding an object you can study and reminisce about. I long for the days when you would spend time flicking through the instruction manual that came with every boxed game. I already have subscription fatigue from various streaming services, including, dare I say it, PS Plus. There's just too much content that I largely never touch, yet pay for. The thought of yet another subscription just makes me want to run a mile. ■

"I have subscription fatigue from various streaming services."

OSCAR TAYLOR-KENT
EDITOR

"THEY CAN PRY THE DISCS OUT OF MY COLD, DEAD HANDS."

For the US, the Discovery Channel's PlayStation app has been a bit of a canary in the coal mine. While the decision has since been reversed (at least for a while), it was announced that anyone who bought a TV show through it would have their content deleted. Of course, who's using PlayStation to buy TV via such a specific app? But it's in these margins that you can really see the attitudes that inform all decisions of this sort: any digital purchase, on any platform, is on shaky ground. It's particularly worrying for those of us who have built huge libraries thanks to digital deals. These days, with games and movies, I find myself yearning for physical copies of the things I love the most, to ensure I'll never lose them. But game publishers should watch out: customers get burned easily, and *will* move away from digital services that they feel ripped-off by, whether it's legal or not. ■

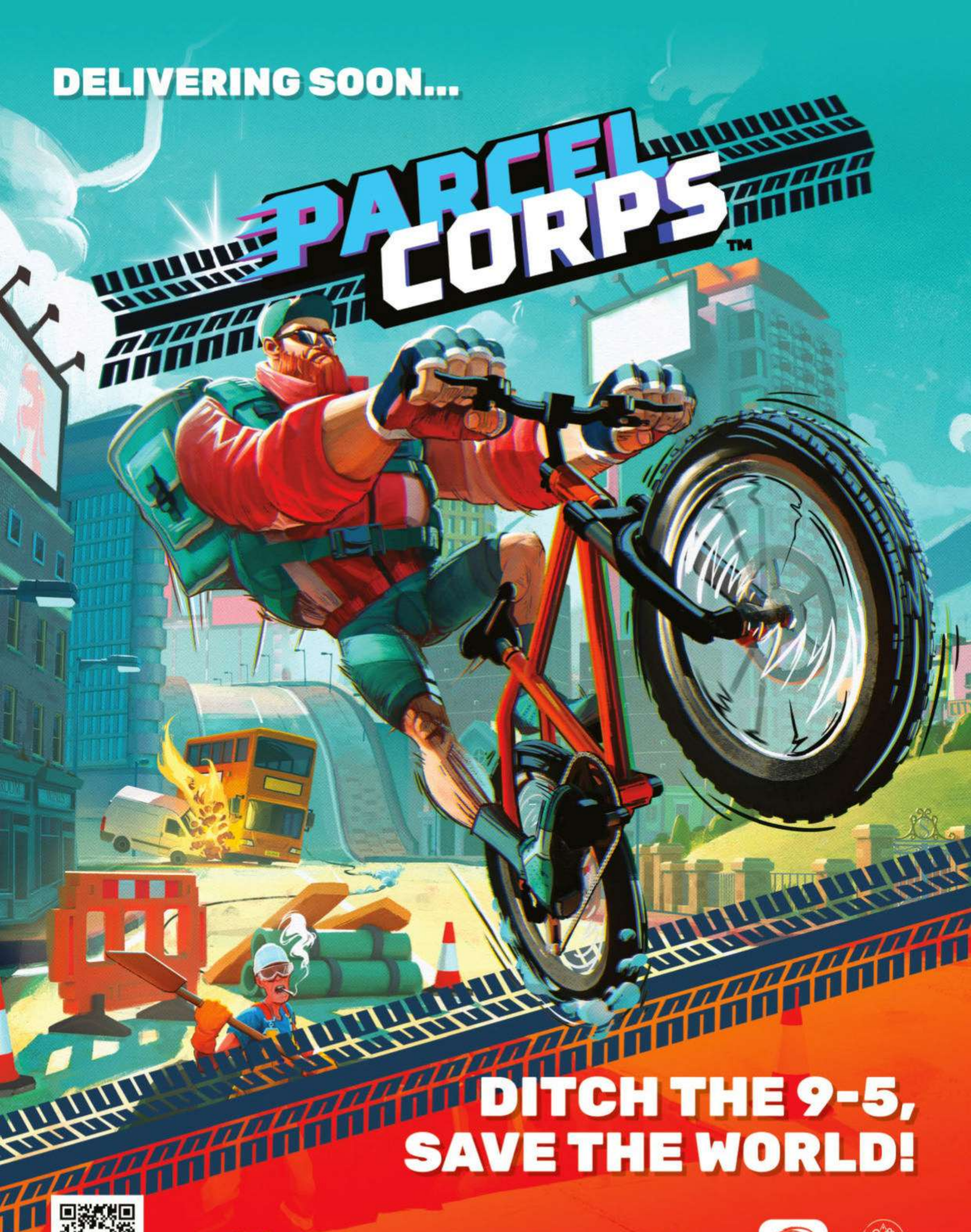
JESSICA KINGHORN
GAMES EDITOR

"PLEASE, LET ME PLAY MY FORGOTTEN FAVOURITES IN PEACE."

Just for fun, I looked up the going rate for a used copy of Shadow Hearts on PS2 – and had the wind knocked out of me. Still, part of me hopes my favourite 2001 RPG never sees a rerelease, if only to save it from the true cosmic horror of digital landlordism. Yes, going digital has made some stone-cold classics more accessible when the secondhand market has run away with the fairies, but it's ultimately a limited library that we players have no control over. Too many favourites have already been scrubbed from these walled gardens, driving up the price of physical copies – but until videogame preservation is freed from the talons of corporate interests, I'll carry on scouring eBay. ■

DELIVERING SOON...

PARCEL CORPS™



DITCH THE 9-5, SAVE THE WORLD!

STEAM PS5 XBOX SERIES X|S

BillyGoat ENTERTAINMENT

SECRET MODE

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IN THE MOOD FOR...

Baked goods

Move over, Paul Hollywood – PlayStation's serving tasty treats, savoury and sweet

1 FINAL FANTASY XIV
Deep discussions and emotional moments often happen at mealtimes and FFXIV is no exception. There are a number of bread-based revelations over the course of your journey, but tearing open the delightfully fluffy buuz bun is one of the most impactful. Don't blame us for any steamed bun cravings you may suffer after this.

2 DEVIL MAY CRY 3
We can't blame Dante for being miffed when demons interrupt his pizza time. Quite frankly he handles it rather gracefully, providing dance moves and music while dealing out death in the opening few minutes. He even manages to save himself a slice. That's the kind of respect pizza deserves.

3 I AM BREAD
The single-slice protagonist of this game must come from the mightiest loaf in all of gaming history to be able to achieve such feats as scaling kitchen cupboards and navigating the bedroom floor while remaining partially edible. A hero of our times.

4 THE WITCHER 3
The fantasy genre is the perfect place to admire a vast array of baked goods, but nothing can quite beat the temptation of a crusty cob and a wedge of cheese (without toxic fumes) as our ultimate fantasy lunch. There's a purity to a chunk of bread that can't be overlooked.

5 BALDUR'S GATE 3
While BG3 certainly offers a lot of buns we'd like to butter, today we're only interested in the baked variety. When the world seems mostly filled with rotten lemons and fearsome lengths of chewy salami, it feels like a real treat to stumble upon a buttered bun to enjoy for your campside snack.

6 FINAL FANTASY XV
Resident camp chef Ignis is a genius when it comes to thinking up new recipes, but his range of meat pies really takes things up a notch. How has he figured out how to bake flaky pastry so perfectly with nothing but a camp stove? Surely this culinary feat alone makes him the most powerful of the gang.

7 GENSHIN IMPACT
Why merely heal yourself when you can heal yourself deliciously? Eating tea-break pancakes is the tastiest way to relieve your aching muscles and stitch any open wounds resulting from all that fighting monsters and exploring. The syrup helps sweeten the bitter taste of your latest batch of gacha rolls.

8 MINECRAFT
Classic icing choice, cherries, delicate crumb, perfectly cut corners... this block-builder's cake has it all. There is one fatal flaw, though – the fights over who gets one of the larger corner slices will be vicious. Maybe Mojang should reconsider round things just to avoid the bloodshed of scenarios like this.

9 TES V: SKYRIM
Let me guess, someone stole your sweet roll? No list of tasty bakes would be complete without this classic treat. It's so iconic that people have found ways to make the real thing at home. Here's hoping the bucket-over-the-head trick works when stealing those ones too.

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

Portal
Yes, we get it, the cake is a lie, etc etc. You were probably wondering where this one is; it's in cliché jail. It's time to move on.

GTA: Vice City
Why settle for baking delicious pizza when you can deliver it too? As Vice City's vehicle missions go, this is far from, er, a piece of cake.

Overcooked
The only reason this cake didn't make the main list is because it's always a pain to make. [*Surely if it's a pain, it's French bread?* – ed]

Did we miss your most mouthwatering bake? Got an In The Mood For idea? Show and tell at **twitter.com/PLAYgamingmag**

1

2

3

4

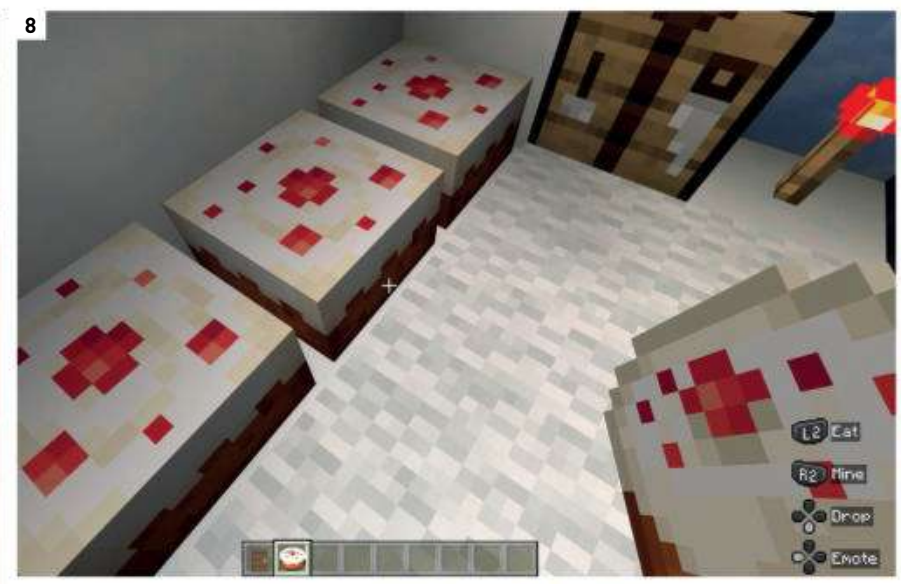
5

6

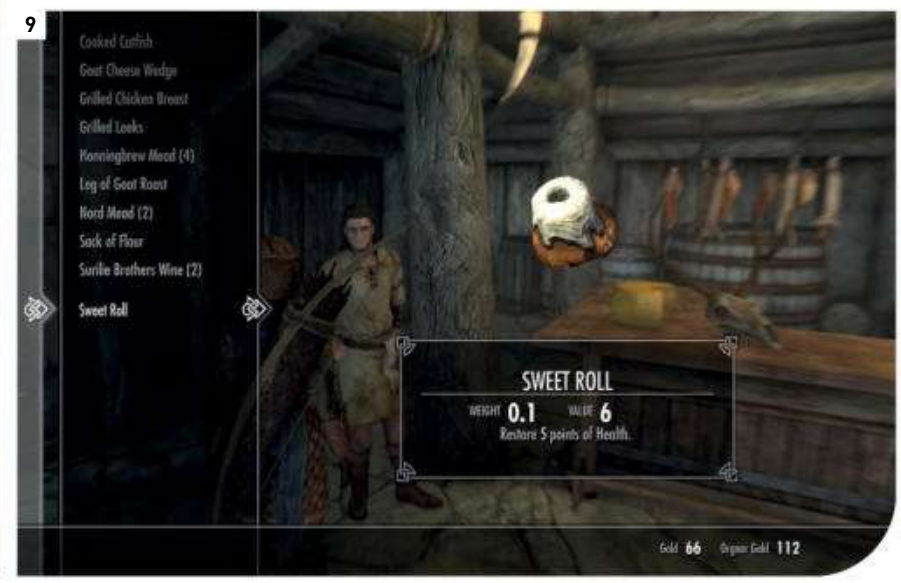
7

"THE SYRUP HELPS SWEETEN
THE BITTER TASTE OF YOUR
LATEST GACHA ROLLS."

8


L2 Eat
R2 Mine
Drop
Emote

9


Cooked Catfish
Goat Cheese Wedge
Grilled Chicken Breast
Grilled Leeks
Honningbrew Mead (4)
Leg of Goat Roast
Nord Mead (2)
Sack of Flour
Surilie Brothers Wine (2)
Sweet Roll
SWEET ROLL
WEIGHT 0.1 VALUE 6
Restore 5 points of Health.
Gold 66 Organic Gold 112

> MyFaction isn't taken seriously by the game's community.

OPINION

"WWE 2K HAS A SERIOUS PROBLEM, AND IT NEEDS TO BE RKO'D."

The wrestling series is losing favour with fans over MyFaction mode

WRITER BIO
Ben Wilson is a former editor of Official PlayStation Magazine. He now spends his days recreating classic WrestleManias in digital form.

For two years, 2K Sports has been celebrated for one of the bravest decisions in modern gaming: cancelling WWE 2K21 in order to spend more than two years rebooting the series for PS5. In a world where annual updates are king, it was a monumental call. Such praise is justified. However, fans are slowly turning against the publisher – and more people need to be talking about it.

The issue centres on a mode called MyFaction. Much like Ultimate Team, you build squads of wrestlers to take into matches. Much like Ultimate Team, this is done by finding cards in packs, or buying them with virtual currency. Much like Ultimate Team, the fastest way of doing this is by converting real cash and spending it.

Unlike Ultimate Team, however, MyFaction isn't taken seriously by the game's community. Match options are limited and online play is mediocre. Universe, MyGM, and exhibition matches are the ways most hardcore players enjoy the series. Herein lies the problem. Over the last year, 2K has attempted to drag gamers away from those favourites and towards MyFaction by adding alternate gimmicks and attires exclusive to the latter mode. You know, the one where you're encouraged to spend real money.

Scott Steiner is one of this year's most requested characters – but is exclusive to MyFaction.

It's an incredibly dubious approach. Take multi-time women's champion Bayley. She's a nefarious heel now, but her big break came back in 2015, as a loveable face character with a happy theme tune and hand-waving inflatable mascots. In October, 2K patched this guise into the game, with her correct hairstyle, attire, and entrance videos – but exclusive to MyFaction. When footage was shared on Twitter, one fan summed things up: "Why are they locking all this cool stuff behind that awful game mode?"

MILLION DOLLAR MEN

The question may well be rhetorical. Everyone knows why. The publisher wants fans to fork out additional money for a title whose deluxe edition cost £89.99 and season pass was priced at £32.99. Perhaps it simply feels that it's following in the footsteps of EA, whose 2022-23 revenue for 'extra content' totalled $4.3 billion – half of which is believed to have come from Ultimate Team. But these are separate entities, and two wrongs do not make a right.

I've no wish to defend FC 24's method of enticing fans into chasing the best cards, but unlocking Prime Gullit or Pele does at least offer a leg-up in a highly competitive esport. That isn't the case with the 2015 incarnation of Bayley. Fans want her, and 'dark' Alexa Bliss, and 'Big Poppa Pump' Scott Steiner, simply for casual throwback joy, rather than to get an edge in online combat. 2K knows this... but wants you to pay anyway.

Worst of all, some content creators have unlocked these alternate models and uploaded them to the game's (excellent) Community Creations servers, only to have them taken down, with threats of accounts being banned. The message being: you will pay for this content, or not have it at all. Ironically, most fans would happily cough up for the extra outfits, if only they were playable in the modes people actually care about, too. A storm is brewing as WWE 2K24 looms. If MyFaction locks remain in place, stand back: there's a hurricane coming through.

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"The city at ground level is more than just set dressing."

OPINION

"SOMETIMES APPRECIATING NEW YORK IS MORE SATISFYING THAN SAVING IT."

Spider-Man 2's city is too richly detailed to swing straight through

WRITER BIO
Harry Shepherd is often perplexed at the size of his backlog, despite him repeatedly doing nothing in videogames for hours at a time.

Something I never thought I'd say: some of my favourite moments in a Spider-Man game didn't involve me doing... anything. Not swinging between skyscrapers. Not socking it to shoplifters or hanging out with MJ. Instead, I people-watch, perched on a bridge in Central Park. I watch leaves sway and rivers trickle. I simply exist.

If you're thinking this is a strange way to experience Spider-Man 2, it's because it kind of is. Insomniac has nailed the feeling of movement, especially doing so as quickly as possible. You're encouraged to dive to pick up momentum, zip to a point and time your jump for an extra boost, and launch yourself around obstacles to speedily change course. What's more, there are the new web wings that you can use in wind tunnels to zoom through the world in mere moments. Even fast travel, once unlocked in each section of the map, is eerily instantaneous.

MEANWHILE, IN NYC

So, why, if traversal is as fun and efficient as it is, would you ever stay still? I thought the same thing until I started polishing off my last combat-related trophies for the Platinum after I'd finished the campaign. While I was waiting for crimes to take place, I started to notice how surprisingly detailed Insomniac's New York is. I started enjoying strolling through the High Line and poking around Coney Island so much I stopped wanting to actually do my Friendly Neighbourhood Spider-tasks.

Central Park is just as handsome at ground level as it is whooshed past a hundred feet in the air.

What I realised was Spider-Man 2 at ground level is far more than just set dressing – a launchpad from which to resume your next session of swinging through the skies. If you take a moment to pause (as you do in a certain FNSM request side-mission with a returning character) you'll find a far richer environment than you might expect. Just walking along the bustling roads I could hear spontaneous street music and see vibrant street art I'd have thoughtlessly whizzed past hours earlier, laser-focused on my next mission. NPCs behave somewhat normally and even have real-life conversations: as I watched a man peering at a pretzel cart in Central Park, I was distracted by a man and a woman discussing her body's recovery after having a baby. Those infamously under-developed boat people from the first game? They look like proper human beings now.

What I'm trying to say is Insomniac's version of New York feels *alive*. Its surface is more than just surface-level. For a space that you only really use to fight criminals, pick up the injured to take them to a nearby ambulance, and accept the occasional high-five from passers-by, it has no right feeling as authentic as it does.

There's so much here that 99 percent of players will miss, but it's there for those who take a moment to slow down and properly soak up their environment. It's like optional Easter egg hunting, which feels liberating after being more or less told where to look when it comes to your Photo Op collectibles. In other words, in between science experiments, clearing Hunter hideouts, and the small matter of saving the world from an interstellar symbiote, take some time to slow down and actually be a part of the world you're saving, and you won't regret it.

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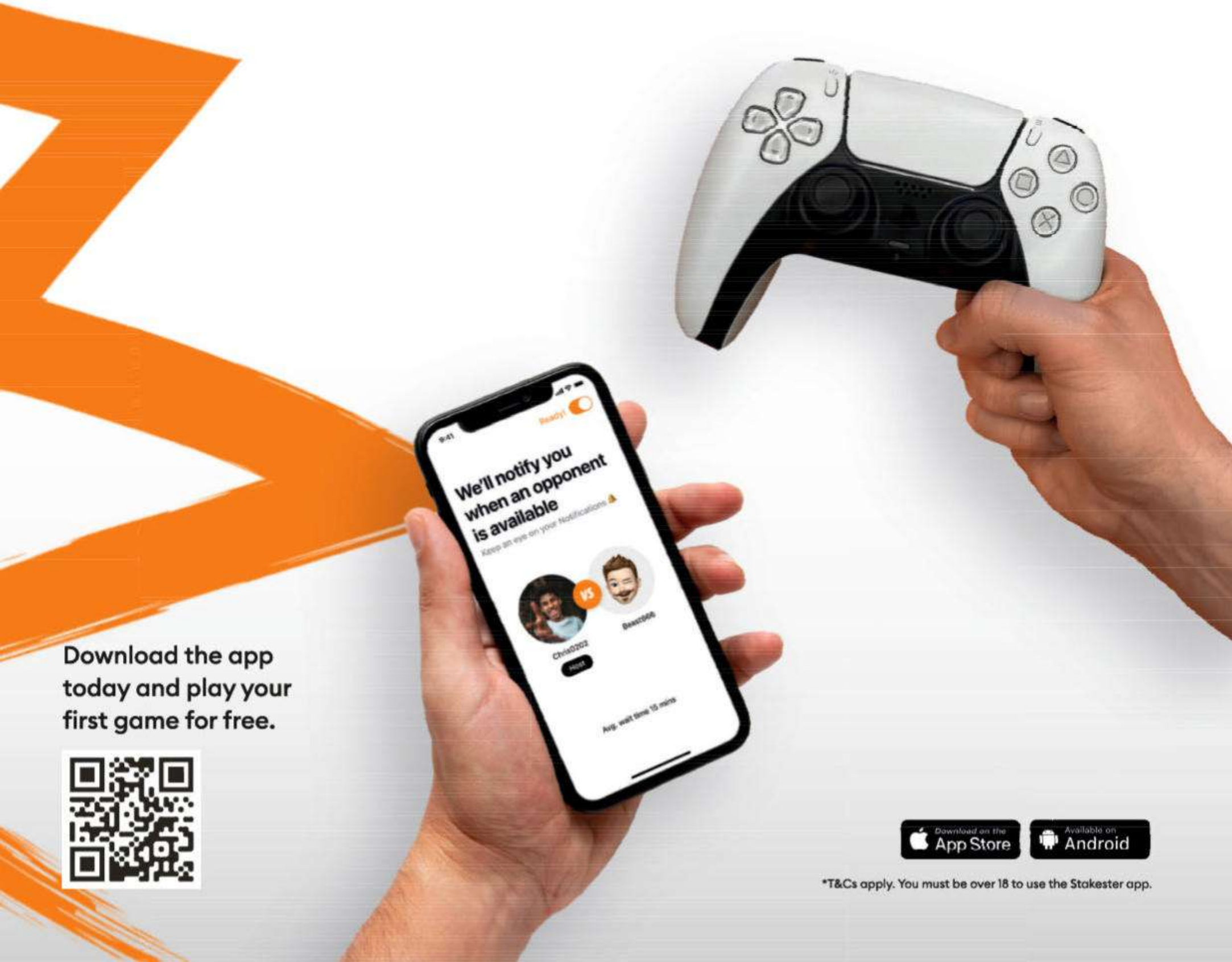

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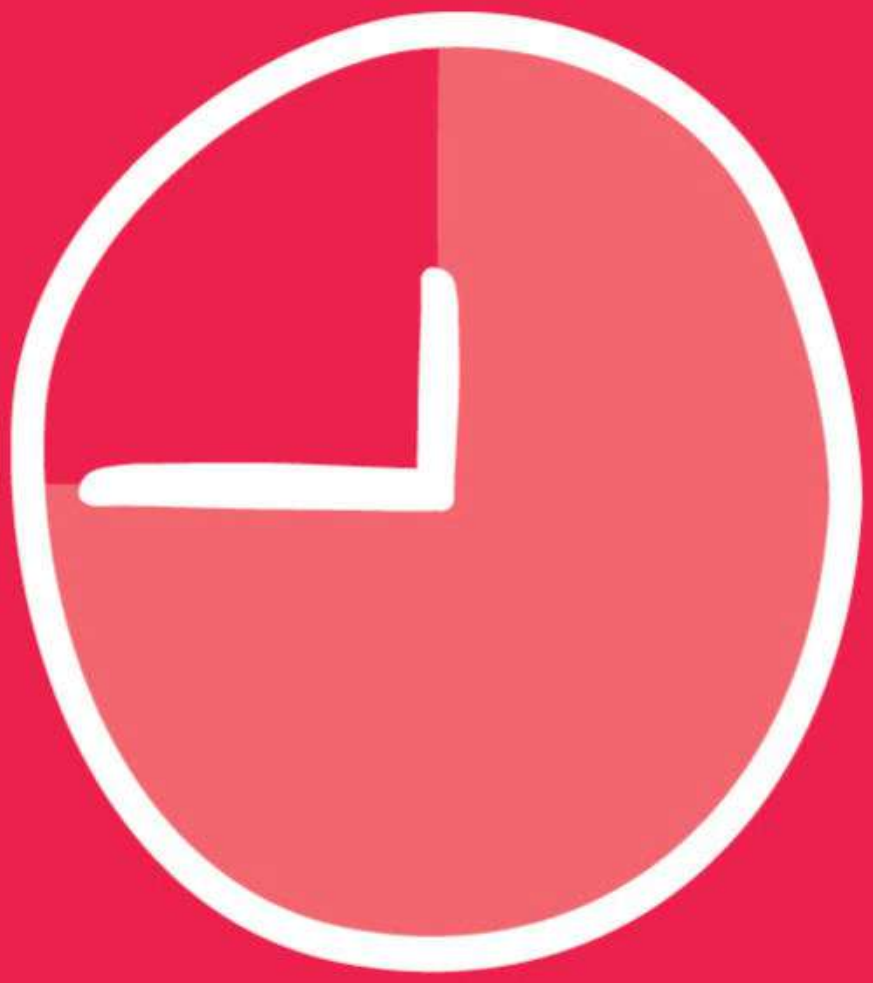

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Registered with FUNDRAISING REGULATOR

Previews

"YOU PLAY AS A FLYING SHEPHERD."

040 Flock

034 Parcel Corps

Like Jet Set Radio? On your bike...

HIGHLIGHTS

UMURANGI GENERATION 026 | GO-GO TOWN! 030 | HOUSE FLIPPER 2 031 | THE MERMAID'S TONGUE 032
PARCEL CORPS 034 | BROTHERS: A TALE OF TWO SONS REMAKE 038 | AS DUSK FALLS 039 | FLOCK 040
SYMPHONIA 042 | EXOBORNE 044 | HAPPYFUNLAND 045 | IB 045 | WHISKER WATERS 045 | OPEN ROADS 045

PREVIEW

"ENVIRONMENTAL CLUES POINT TO A GOVERNMENT GRASPING FOR CONTROL AMID A GLOBAL CALAMITY."

You have photo objectives but you also have the freedom to take your own snaps.

FORMAT PS5, PS4, PSVR2 / **ETA** 18 APR / **PUB** PLAYISM
DEV ORIGAME DIGITAL / **PLAYERS** 1

Umurangi Generation

Snap photos at the end of the world

Where some game developers seem to shy awkwardly away from being 'politically charged', Umurangi Generation creator Origame Digital completely embraces it. This stylish first-person photography adventure invites you to take part in the creative process of snapping cool pictures, but it also tasks you with documenting a global historical event involving giant killer robots and interstellar invaders – all caught on 35mm film.

Originally released on PC in 2020, this PlayStation release isn't only a more complete package (it incorporates the Macro DLC that adds more maps, items, and a heap of extra story to the game), but will also be released for PSVR2 with plenty of smart reworks, such as a diegetic user interface, to make the extra immersion feel more natural.

In a futuristic Tauranga, New Zealand, you play as a courier taking photos while you deliver packages in a neon-soaked cyberpunk city. With ten minutes on the clock, you're given a set of photo bounties and need to fulfil them by finding the perfect subject within the highs and lows of each location and then snapping a photo.

You'll begin with a basic lens but in each level you're given a flashy new piece of camera kit to mess around with. This equipment should get your creative juices flowing, and you'll find yourself frequently switching your gear as you discover photo opportunities that require a certain approach. For example, if you're particularly taken with the smoggy majesty of a concrete high-rise you'll need to whip out the wide-angle lens to capture the entire building. And if you're a photography nerd, you'll be pleased to note you have control over the shutter speed, ISO, and aperture, just like with a real SLR camera.

Lenses enable you to mess with perspective and space, but you can also adjust the final photo using the game's editing tools, whether that's making small colour grading touches or going wild with the bloom and saturation. Each time you take a snap, you're taken to an editing screen with a handful of options. Each photo is then judged on its colour, content, and composition and will net you a cash score which will go towards your final payout at the end of the level. This scoring system isn't concrete, however. There's less emphasis on things being 'right' or 'wrong' and more on you being given a set of creative tools to express yourself however you like.

FACTRICK

1. FEATHERED FRIEND

The cute penguin that features in each level is called Pengi and can become your friend.

2. MEDIA MASHUP

Inspirations for the game include Neon Genesis Evangelion, Jet Set Radio, and Shin Godzilla.

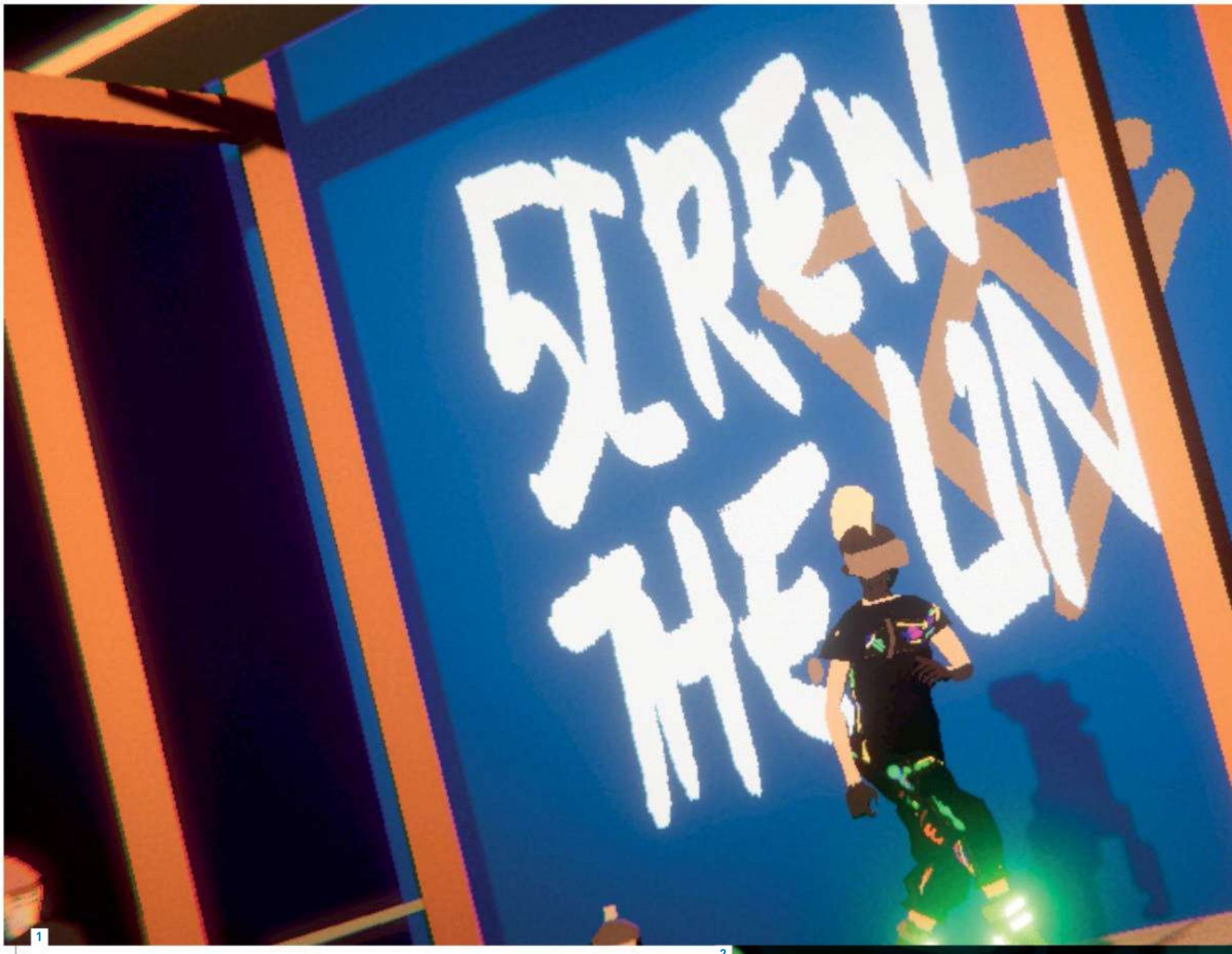
3. FIGHTING WORDS

Solo developer Naphtali Faulkner describes Umurangi's setting as a "shitty future".

POINT AND SHOOT

Bounties are also designed to encourage you to navigate the city in interesting ways. Each level offers a mix of light platforming and exploration as you seek out ways of fulfilling each bounty. Levels are mainly static but are stuffed with parkour potential. Dropping down

TRACK RECORD Umurangi Generation is solo Maori developer Naphtali 'Veselekov' Faulkner's first game and originally started as a way to teach their cousin how to use a DSLR camera – hence the realistic photography.



1

from ledges, balancing on metal beams, and jumping from one balcony to the next all become second nature as you hunt for the best vantage points. There's a cluttered, lived-in feel to these spaces so you quickly learn to spot potential routes through the chaos. For example, to fulfil a particular bounty you may need to shimmy along the edge of a windowsill, jump across to a fire escape, climb its ladder, and then balance on a precarious wooden board to reach that perfect shot.

In the process, these objectives subtly draw your attention to Umurangi's story. You begin by taking photos of grungy graffiti and boomboxes, but as you progress your eye is expertly guided to what's happening within the walls of the city. Your photo album will start filling up with snaps of tear gas canisters, crates of ammunition, and candlelit memorials. The sun-kissed rooftop at the start of the game begins to feel like a world away as you're dropped into the middle of military outposts and evacuation checkpoints. Your aesthetic photo choices slowly morph into what feels like proof of a historic event. Photo bounties and other environmental clues point to a government grasping for control amid a global calamity, the scale of which it cannot comprehend.

CHANGING FOCUS

But there's still life amid all this chaos. Environments are enlivened with colour and energy thanks to the young people who have not only had to survive an intergalactic invasion but now live under a malicious government. Their art – music, dancing, and graffiti – is a form of radical resistance that will not be stamped out. Taking pretty photos is fun, but in Umurangi Generation photos have a purpose: to record what's happening to this city and how creative young people are helpless to stop it.

Here, you're documenting a crisis, one a government would rather forget is taking place. We're not fighting alien invaders in the real world just yet, but its story of a generation living through a global crisis shares the same sentiments as many real-world events; pretty powerful storytelling.

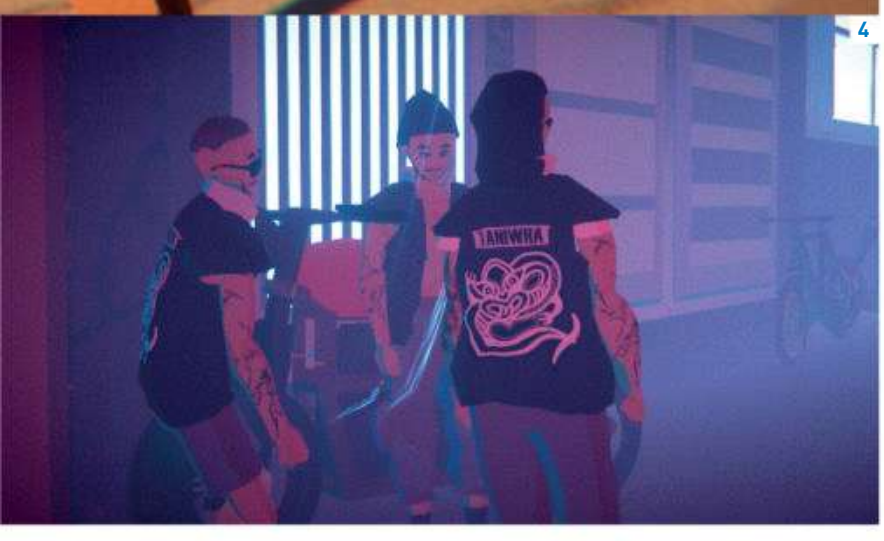
IMPRESSIONS

Umurangi Generation uses the art of photography to tell an important story, and we're looking forward to playing (and photographing) more when it lands on our PlayStations later this year.

2

3

1 Some not-so-subtle environmental storytelling thanks to the graffiti at the back of this shot. 2 The telephoto lens is perfect for character portraits, and the in-game lens has a shallow depth of field just like the real thing would, so only the subject is in focus. 3 No, you may not climb the giant mech hand. 4 Finding film capsules increases the number of photos you can take in the main game, but in Creative mode there's no limit.



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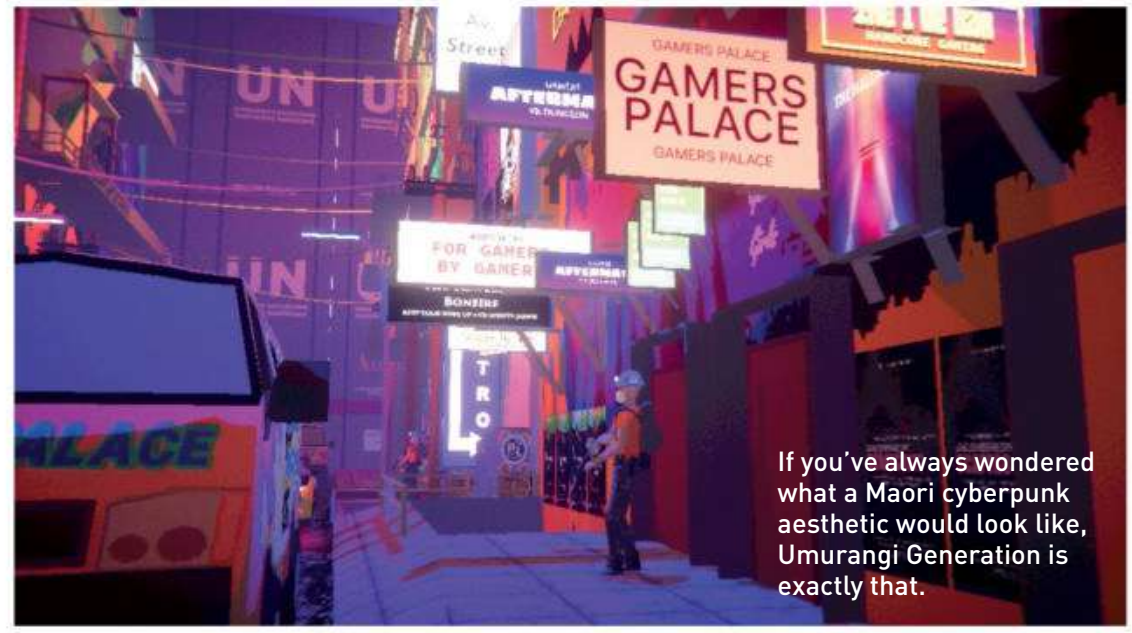
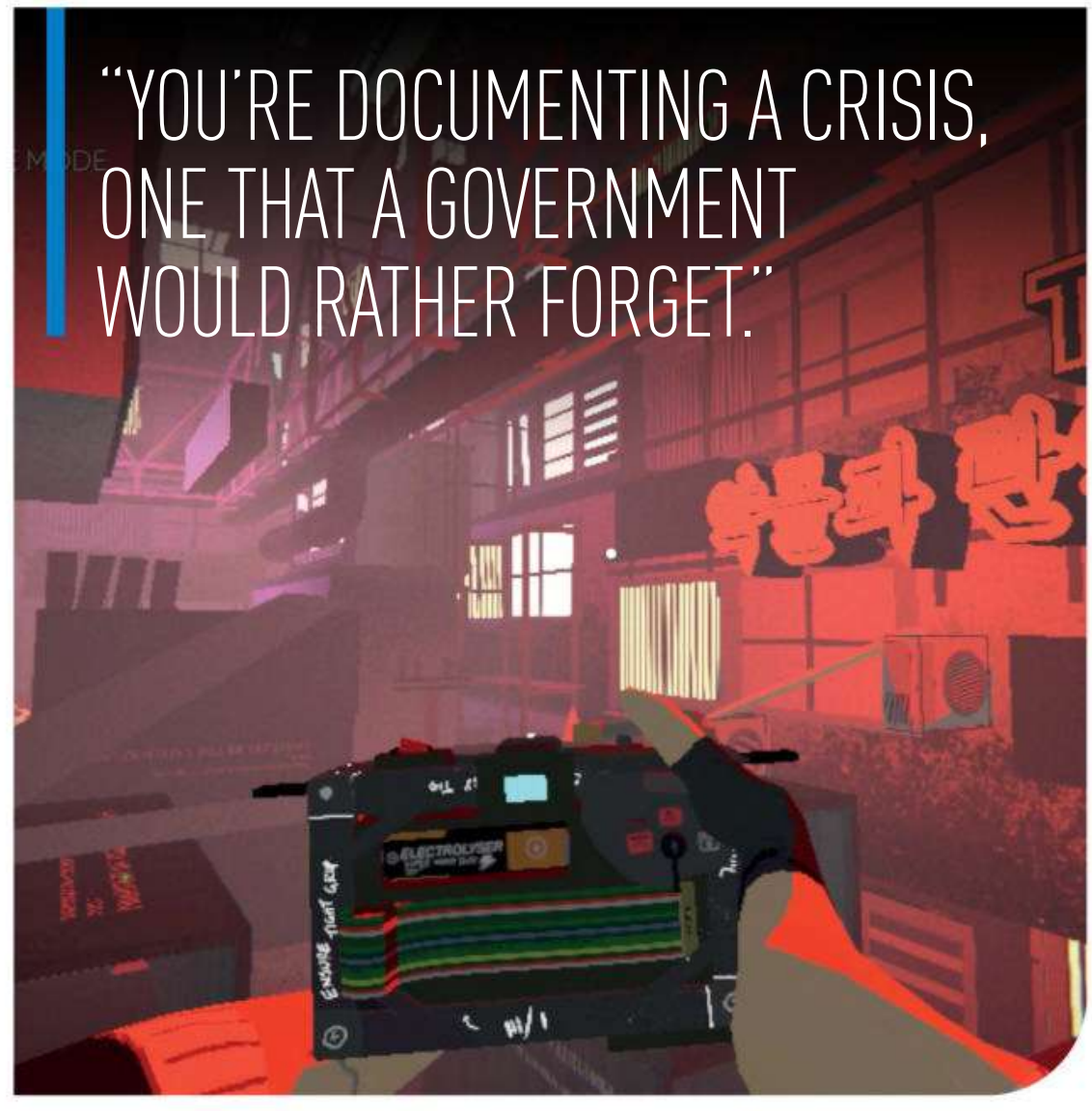


If you've always wondered what a Maori cyberpunk aesthetic would look like, Umurangi Generation is exactly that.



"YOU'RE DOCUMENTING A CRISIS, ONE THAT A GOVERNMENT WOULD RATHER FORGET."

Kitted out

Level up your photos with these camera lenses

01

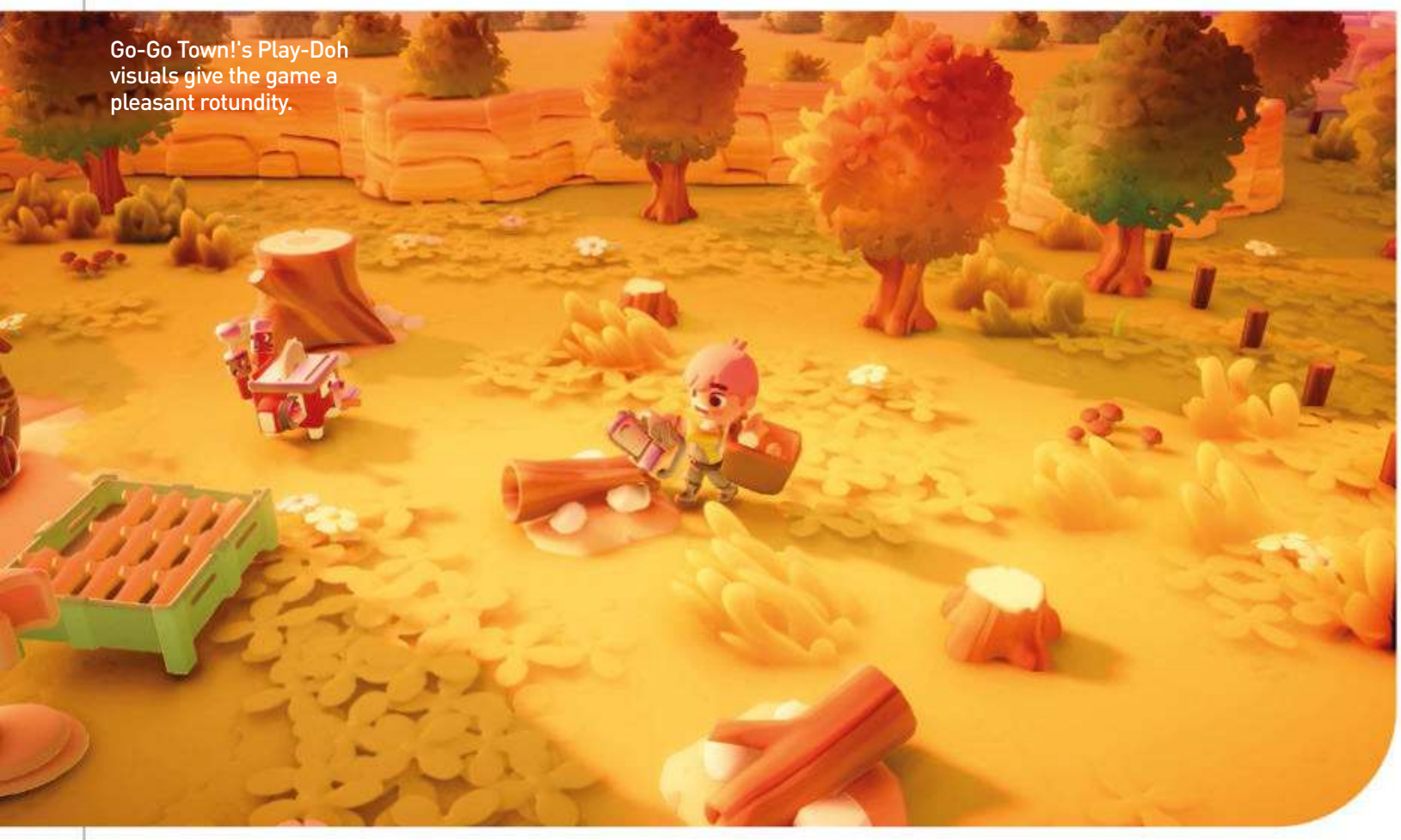
The RF45 wide-angle lens grants you a massive field of view for those moments when you want to snap a sweeping landscape or a big group of people.

02

The KB66 75-300mm telephoto lens brings subjects that are far in the distance closer in perspective and in incredible detail, while blurring the background.

03

The A10-60mm Aurora fisheye lens has a curved shape that morphs your point of view, allowing for a greater, if completely warped, field of vision.



Go-Go Town!'s Play-Doh visuals give the game a pleasant rotundity.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 2024 / **PUB** PRIDEFUL SLOTH / **DEV** CULT GAMES, PRIDEFUL SLOTH / **PLAYERS** 1-2

Go-Go Town!

Bring a town back from the brink

City builders can be a bit serious. You have to juggle an increasing population with creating an efficient building layout, managing resources expertly, and creating an economy so lucrative the Monopoly man would be impressed. However, in Go-Go Town! the most pressing issue you face is whether you want the new shop to sell doughnuts or pet rocks.

Developer Cult Games isn't looking to challenge your number-crunching abilities – instead it's created a cutesy, laid-back city builder that's more in line with life sims like Stardew Valley and Animal Crossing, but with much more of an emphasis on building and resource management. It's a familiar setup: after taking a quick phone call you're officially the new mayor of a run-down town and are now responsible for fixing it up and helping it prosper.

To kick-start this mammoth project, you first need to repair existing buildings, but soon enough you'll be expanding the town to your liking. Bouncing around with your big, goofy backpack, you can use your tools to collect resources – chainsaws for wood, drills for stone, and the like – then start constructing shops and selling products to make money, all while expanding your town's infrastructure.

> "AS MAYOR OF A RUN-DOWN TOWN, FIX IT UP AND HELP IT PROSPER."

PLANNING PERMISSION

That all sounds pretty standard, but what makes Go-Go Town! a little more interesting is how it utilises automation. Instead of having to rush around doing everything yourself, you can get the townsfolk to help you. For example, you can hire miners and lumberjacks to gather materials, shopkeepers and artisans to help boost commerce, and delivery drivers to travel back and forth across town. You'll need to keep an eye on the supply chain, but with expert planning everything should end up working like a delicate clockwork machine, leaving you to farm, fish, and drive around your town in a leisurely manner on your unicorn tricycle.

IMPRESSIONS

A cosy city-builder with lots of potential. A perfect fit for those who would like a bit more management in their life sims.

Build attractions like this amusement arcade to make your town a fun tourist destination.

ON THE HORIZON

The next six months, mapped out

02 months

RISE OF THE RONIN

Team Ninja returns to samurai action, giving you an entire open world to explore and battle in.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 22 MAR
PUB SONY

04 months

IREM COLLECTION VOL 3

Mr Heli, Mystic Riders, and Dragon Breed join the growing Irem archive of '80s and '90s arcade hits.

FORMAT PS5, PS4
ETA Q2 2024 / **PUB** UNITED GAMES ENTERTAINMENT

06 months

WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

Space has a bug problem, and it's up to you to squash them for the Emperor.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 9 SEP
PUB FOCUS ENTERTAINMENT

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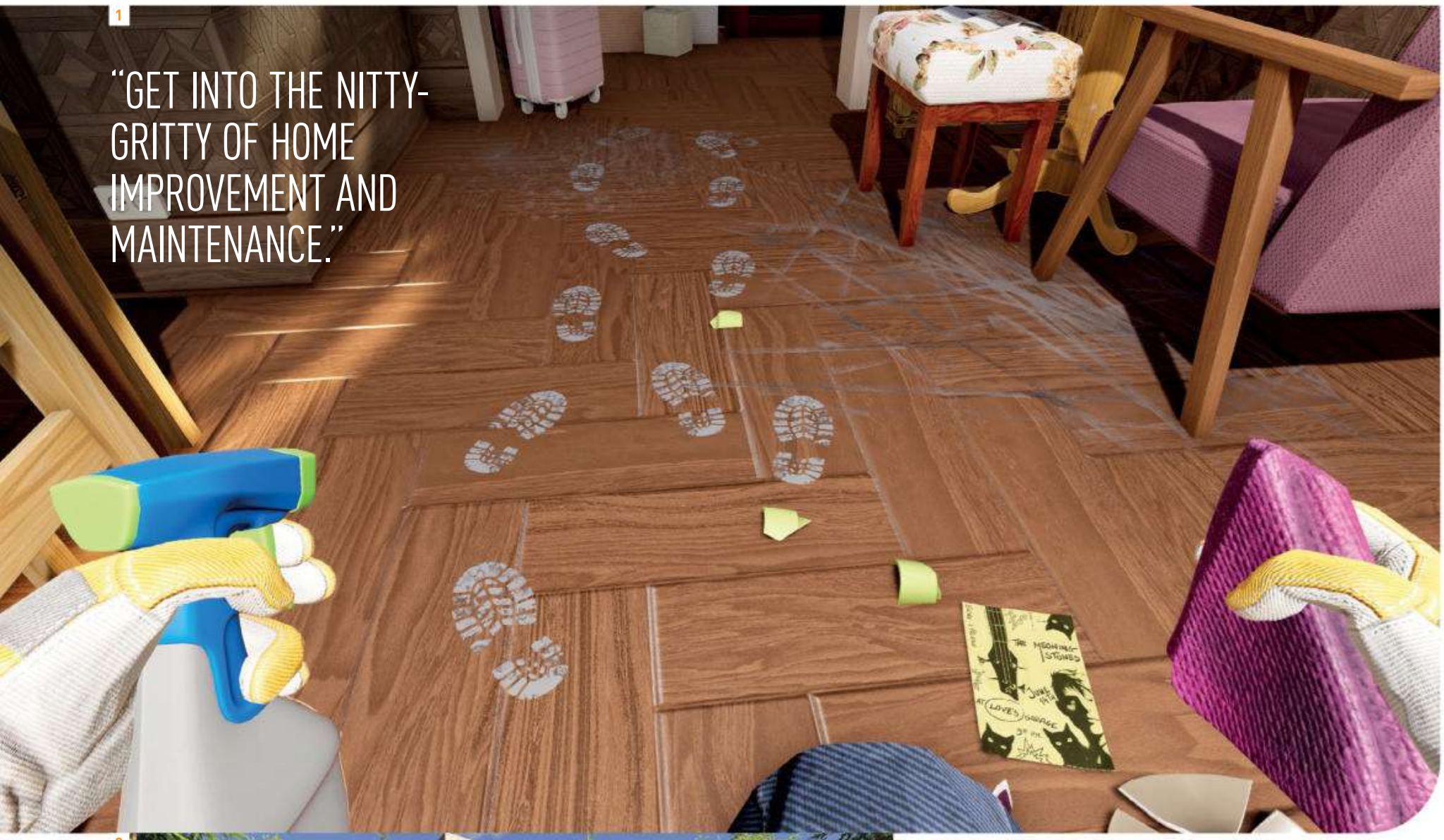


2

1 It's not all smashing through walls and floors (unfortunately). People want their houses to be architectural masterpieces, but they want them to be clean as well. 2 Ooo, now *this* is a nice house. Think you can do better? Flaunt your design skills in sandbox mode, and prove it!

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 21 MAR / **PUB** FROZEN DISTRICT
DEV FROZEN DISTRICT, EMPYREAN / **PLAYERS** 1

House Flipper 2

DIY? Because we like it

Not a game about a giant juggling houses, sadly, but this is interesting nonetheless. Get ready to roll your virtual sleeves up and get your digital hands dirty, because in House Flipper there are a whole load of dilapidated buildings waiting for your loving touch.

Nab yourself a nice little fixer-upper, then go about turning it into a dream home. Tidy up the place, give it a lick or 16 of paint, and fix things. Or break them apart so you can build something even better! You'll really get into the nitty-gritty of home improvement and maintenance, with the ability to clean homes once they're livable (somehow so much more fun than tidying an actual room) and to hurl rubbish bags amusingly long distances into a dumpster.

If construction appeals to you more, that's an option too, with sandbox mode allowing you to build an entirely new house from scratch. Story mode, meanwhile, is a carefully curated experience that guides you through renovation projects, tasking you with helping the residents of Pinnacove renovate their existing homes, turning them from houses of horror into people's palaces. Either way, the aim is home improvement to be taken at your own pace.

IMPRESSIONS

A lot of love has gone into this, with impressive attention to detail and a variety of things to do as you create the perfect property. House do they do it?

Time to flip out

Paint the town shades of red

Pinnacove is a big town. We don't fancy playing a 'getting on a bus simulator', so thank goodness for teleportation maps!

Not all houses are in the middle of town; you'll get to work on some lovely beachside properties too. Don't get sand in your pliers.

FORMAT TBC / **ETA** 2024 / **PUB** SFB GAMES / **DEV** SFB GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

The Mermaid's Tongue

The Detective Grimoire duo tackle a maritime murder

Murder most foul! A sea captain has been killed aboard his submarine. He's lying on the floor of a small chamber, the door's locked from the inside and there are no other entrances or exits, and an ancient stone cauldron that's been sealed for hundreds of years now sits open and empty in front of him. That's more than enough to get the detective cogs turning.

Developer SFB Games has once again set up a puzzling conundrum. How did Captain Magnus Mortuga die? What was hidden in that cauldron? Why was the room locked from the inside? It looks like Detective Grimoire and Sally really have their work cut out for them this time.

When we last saw Grimoire and Sally (in Tangle Tower) they were investigating the curious case of a painting that had apparently murdered its creator. And before that, in a game that launched on iOS, Grimoire was called to a murky swampland to solve the mystery of a murderous-mythological-legend-turned-tourist-attraction. Each game delivered an engrossing detective tale that managed to balance whimsy, creepiness, and – most importantly – a damn fine mystery.

From what we've played of The Mermaid's Tongue – a 20-minute demo – we're going to enjoy another captivating puzzle adventure. This time Grimoire and Sally have been called to a small seaside town that has seen better days, to judge by its boarded-up, abandoned stores. We meet the duo on a stakeout in the dreary Stonetop Inn. It's four in the morning and the town is completely dead – that is, until a bright green beacon coaxes the two outside and a submarine emerges by the town's pier, like a beast rising from the deep. The scene of the crime is one the submarine's many chambers, so the two board the ship unaware of what they'll find on this mysterious vessel.

> "DETECTIVE GRIMOIRE AND SALLY REALLY HAVE THEIR WORK CUT OUT FOR THEM THIS TIME."

SUPER SLEUTHS

Interior decor isn't usually at the forefront of a submarine designer's priorities, but the Mortuga is not your usual submarine. As you point and click your way through the sub, each room is bursting with colour and personality, from the parlour bathed in a pinky glow from a roaring fireplace to a giant sea serpent carved into the ship, wrapped around a circular corridor from the ceiling to the floor. You'll be hard-pressed to find a leaky pipe in plain sight. The group of rooms is an eclectic one, and that variety is something we'll see echoed in its eccentric occupants when we get our hands on the full game. For now, however, the submarine remains empty.

We find a single puzzle in the submarine's Mess Hall – a light brainteaser that asks us to match a set of shapes to a set of numbers. It's fun and tactile, but doesn't get us reaching for our notebook. There'll be plenty more puzzles sprinkled around the environment upon release, but for now, the lone puzzle reveals a bottle containing tablets with a sun symbol on the front. While we don't use it in our demo, from the trailer it looks as though Grimoire's fun drag-and-drop deduction system will return.

The last section we get to play in the demo is the crime scene, which is a mess of clues and evidence. The stone cauldron sits at the centre, a mysterious artefact now open, with scratches on the inside that make it look like something was scrambling to escape. An event poster for a ghostly 'illusion show' is pinned to the wall, the words 'Unfathomable!' and 'Inconceivable!' slapped across its centre.

It's all rather curious, and even though there might be little to go on right now, these crumbs are more than enough to excite us. We pick up hints at several underlying themes: dreams and curses; illusion and deception; and the myths and legends of the sea. It's all very elusive, but one thing's for sure: SFB Games has a few new tricks up its sleeves with this latest Grimoire adventure.

IMPRESSIONS

With a captivating setup that already has us reaching for our detective notebook and pen, this followup to Tangle Tower promises to have all the whimsy and mystery of the previous games.

FACTRICK

1. MIC CHECK

The eccentric maritime folk of The Mermaid's Tongue will be brought to life by a full voice cast.

2. MUSIC MAESTRO

Like Tangle Tower this will have a rich and eerie OST with help from the Budapest Art Orchestra.

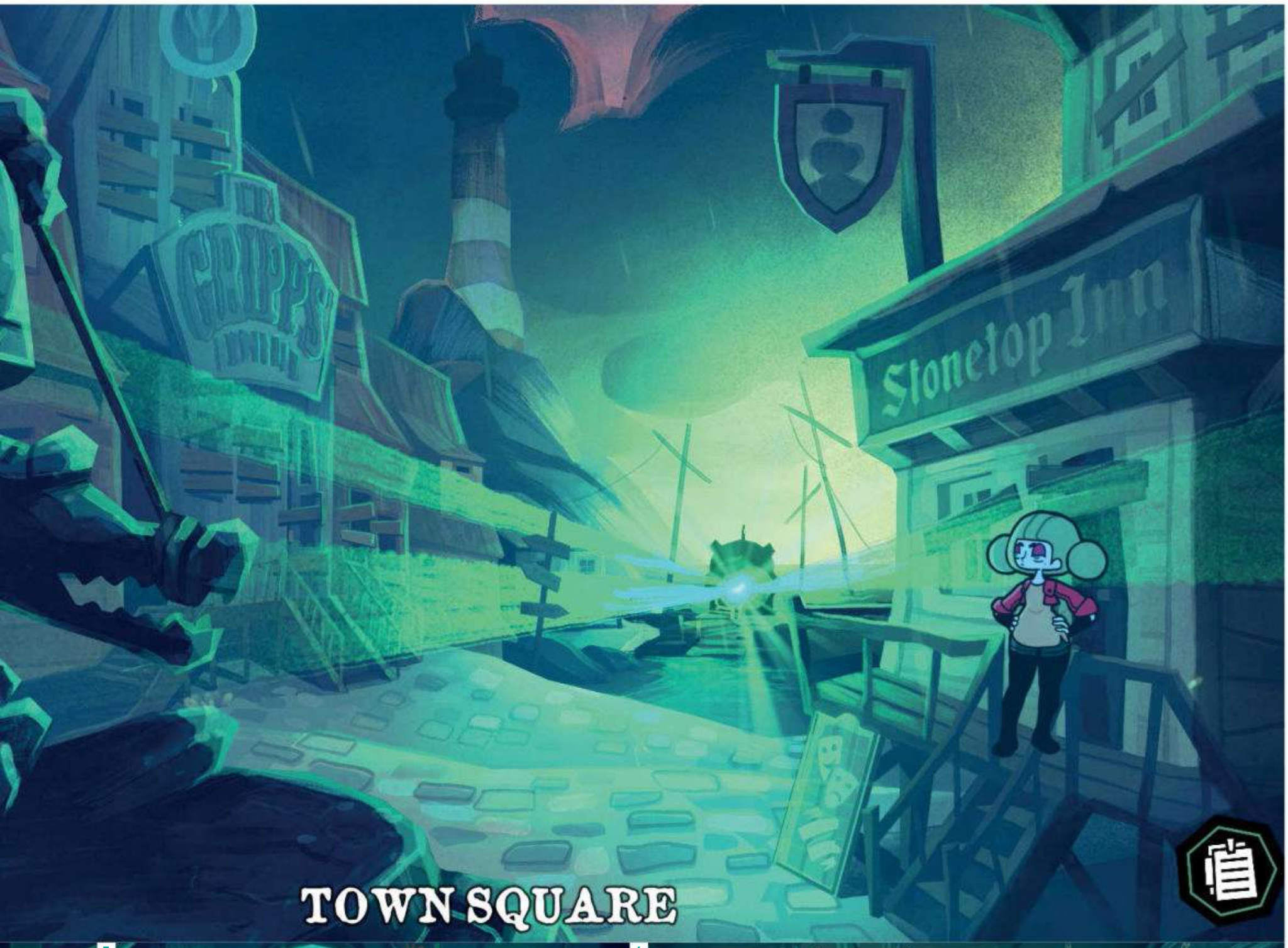
3. SEASONED DETECTIVE

The first Detective Grimoire game was released in 2014, making this year the series' tenth anniversary. Congrats!

TRACK RECORD SFB Games both develops and publishes its titles. The Mermaid's Tongue is the second one the studio is hoping to release in 2024 – the other is retro survival horror Resident Evil-like Crow Country, which we're also keen to get our mitts on.

4 Hand-painted visuals create each location's atmosphere perfectly, from the eerie seaside town to the cosy interior of Mortuga's submarine. 5 A grisly scene revealing a death shrouded in mysterious circumstances. 6 Clues are fully realised 3D objects that you can inspect carefully from all angles.

1 We spot a shadowy figure on deck, opening the submarine's main hatch before disappearing below.
2 The iconic puffer fish lamp makes a welcome return from Tangle Tower.
3 Turning each dial shuffles the shape inside each circle; what could the solution be?



6
Case File
SHUT
OPEN
READ
Murder Victim: Captain Magnus Mortuga (39)
Location: Illusion Theatre, Mortuga Submarine
Mortuga had locked himself in the room. It was later forced open, and the body was discovered.
Mortuga was found alone, laying on his back, with a single cut across his throat. No bladed weapon of any kind was found in the room.
PREV
2/4
NEXT

"NEATLY COMBINES THE INTUITIVE MOVEMENT OF A BICYCLE WITH ARCADE ACTION."

We've heard of the grindset before, but this is ridiculous.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** SECRET MODE
DEV BILLY GOAT ENTERTAINMENT / **PLAYERS** 1

Parcel Corps

Welcome to the rise and grind

This zippy bike courier adventure is a game of two wheels. One of those is snappy arcade action that marries Crazy Taxi's hectic time trial pace with Jet Set Radio's extreme sports moves; the other is a dedication to all the bells, whistles, and spandex of real-life biking.

Sure, the moves we're able to pull off once we've spandexed up ourselves for our hands-on are wild – bunny-hops off car bonnets, low-profile skids below parking barriers, and billboard wallrides to name a few – but the action is all built on true-to-life biking fundamentals.

WHEELIE GOOD

Not only is the option to brake available on both triggers of the pad, each trigger controls a wheel, meaning clutching your controller isn't far off from doing the same with your handlebars. You can ease to a stop or, indeed, manually toe the line to skid round corners with a minimal loss of momentum.

Likewise, you've got to pedal to work up speed, holding the button down to gradually accelerate or mashing it to get up to top speed more quickly. Once you're going, you'll maintain a cruising speed as you direct yourself with the left stick, though release it and you'll rely on momentum alone, freewheeling through traffic or down slopes before taking control again. Hold R1 while descending those slopes and your rider will tuck in, becoming more aerodynamic to build more momentum and whoosh ahead.

Combining the intuitive movement of a bicycle with arcade action is a neat approach. The realism that powers how the bike moves never holds you back, however; your big tricks enable you reach all sorts of secrets, whether that's grabbing half-pipe air and leaping off the wall next to it or holding the jump button down to do a big jump onto a wall, then riding along it to cross a gap.

There's more to the grindset than popping tricks. In keeping with the nature of gig work controlled by apps, you pick up jobs by scanning in-game QR codes, and social media commentary from a fictional audience in the corner of the screen gives you an idea of how well you're doing (and is well observed – one 'viewer' quips "I can actually do better than that").

Business isn't exclusively handled from behind a phone screen, though. First you'll have to do some outreach, impressing potential clients by finding them on the map and completing a task for them. It takes more than simply getting from A to B to satisfy these characters. One we try early on is delivering wine (or at the very least 'fancy juice' in a glass bottle) to an old lady on behalf of a bottle-helmeted king-like figure who requires us to not take too many knocks lest the grape juice go flying (or us – get bonneted and you'll go ragdolling);

FACTRICK

1. FUNKY DEALER

Groovy JSR-like tunes score your frantic deliveries, making New Island fun to vibe in as you bike it up.

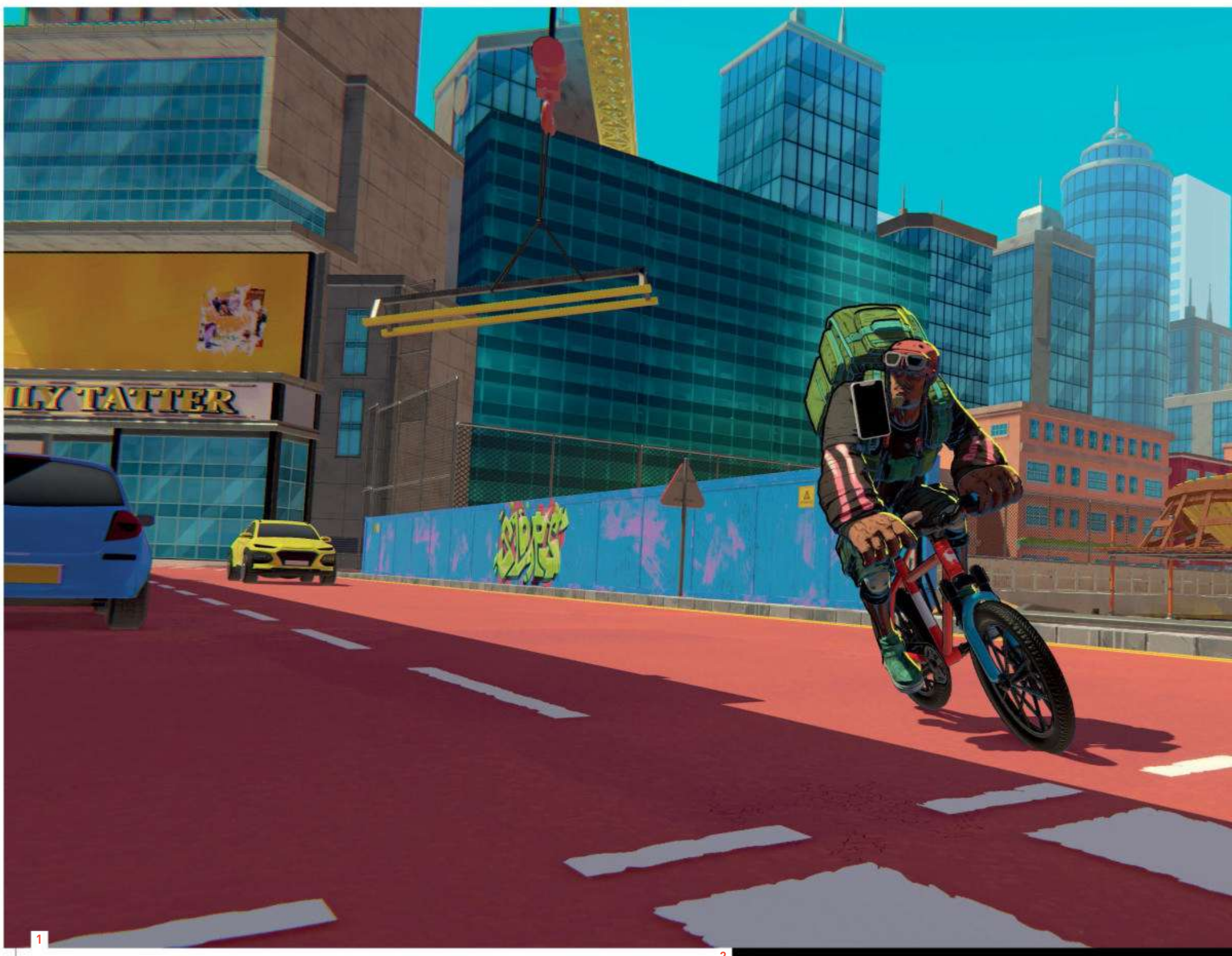
2. FASHION FIT

Director Will Barr appears in our demo tutorial to show us the ropes, complete with a spandex outfit of his own.

3. TOP SECRET

You'll go from making simple deliveries to moving classified documents. Talk about a progression curve!

TRACK RECORD Billy Goat Entertainment previously brought us quirky adventure game Her Majesty's Spiffing and trolley racer Supermarket Shriek. Parcel Corps is a different beast, but has all the studio's tongue-in-cheek humour.



1

another has us completing a series of suspicious package hand-offs on behalf of a strange, blood-spattered fish-and-chip van owner who wears a humungous fish on top of his head (and has oddly finned forearms).

GEE, PS

It's got a literally colourful cast of characters, but then everything in Parcel Corps is bold and bright, from your choice of courier (the beardier the better in our opinion) to the sunny streets of New Island itself.

Completing tasks unlocks further regions of the map for you to expand your enterprise into, and, crucially, a bigger area in which to complete Delivery Rushes. Flipping open your phone, you can select a group of starting clients to mark on your map before setting off under time pressure to chain as many deliveries as you can manage. It's a neat way of funnelling open world exploration into something more arcadey before switching back, an imaginative way of expanding on the Crazy Taxi-like template.

It's also a setup with the potential to allow more complex series of deliveries, while also enabling you to play things a bit safer if you prefer and only take on the jobs you feel like you can guarantee completing. You might not be making bank if you do, but the game will rise to meet the level of challenge you want out of it. (Though tougher deliveries and a police presence promise to make you sweat as you progress.)

There are plenty of lines throughout the slice of the city we get to pedal around, from weaving through traffic to much more vertical options (though we do wish for a greater abundance of grind rails, though perhaps that's just the rollerblader in us talking). As our hands-on ends after our first delivery rush draws to a close, however, we've yet to see how well those threads will weave together once our phone begins to ring off the hook with people desperate for their parcels. Even so, this trial has us spinning our wheels in the right way, hopping back in to blitz through the streets again to beat our scores. That's one way to make sure we achieve a high rider rating.

IMPRESSIONS

A loving understanding of biking intricacies meets moreish arcadey play, promising a smart mix of free-roaming exploration and high score hunting as you master the bike courier grindset.

2

3

1 New Island is teeming with possible routes to take. You're not confined to the road – perhaps it'd be faster to take an alternate way through. 2 Would you buy a haddock from this man? And would you be prepared to eat it? 3 When we suggested hopping on a bus, this wasn't quite what we had in mind... 4 On New Island, there's no such thing as getting stuck in traffic if you have a bike. But you can still have a nasty accident.

"TOUGHER DELIVERIES AND A POLICE PRESENCE PROMISE TO MAKE YOU SWEAT."

Recruitment day

Which employer's delivering what you're looking for?

01

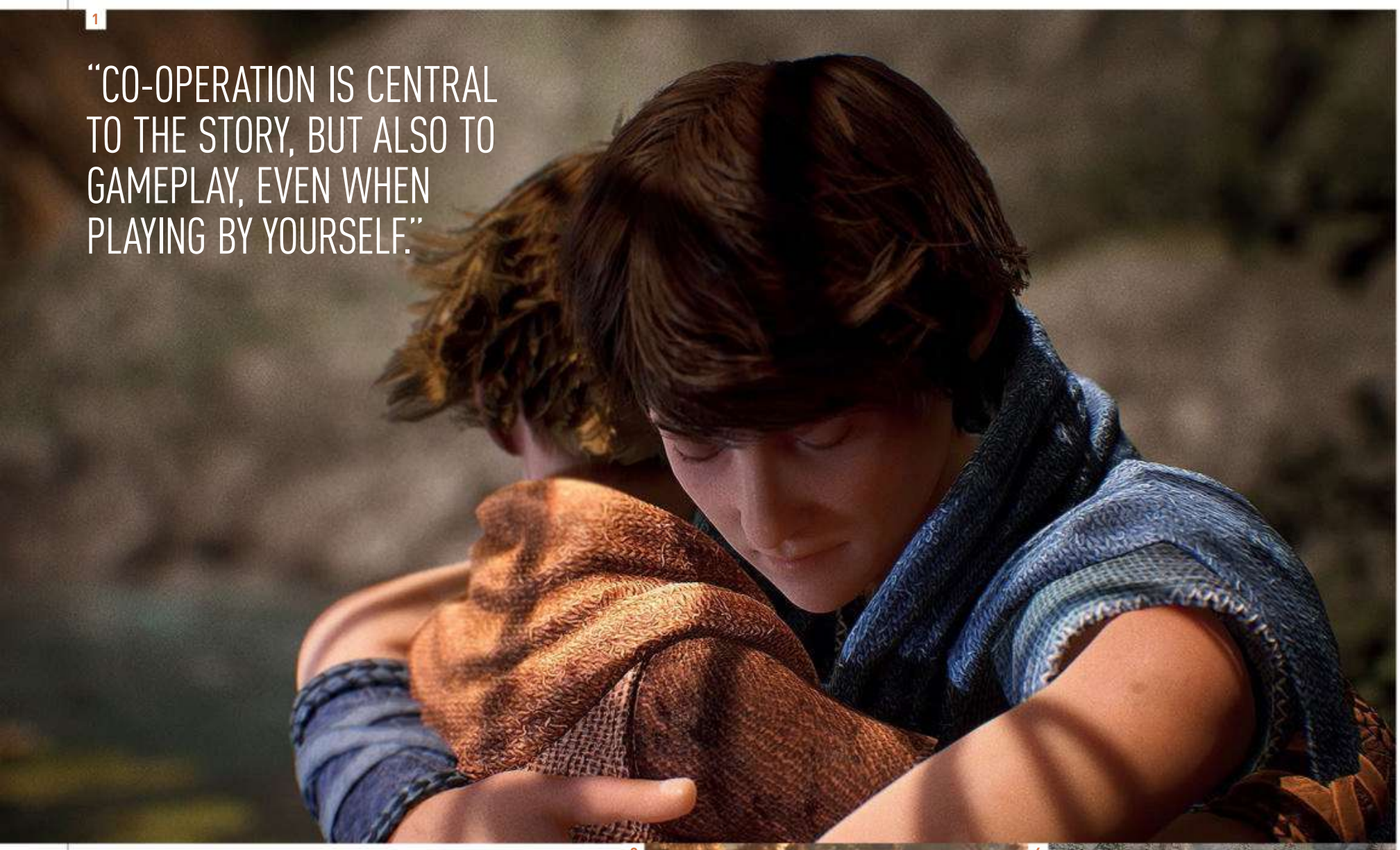
The Wallaby Wheelers is an Anglo-Australian startup with everything that entails, from fashionably bushy beards to the trendiest of headphones.

02

The East Coast Couriers is a firm looking to expand its delivery circle outside of its Brooklyn home, but brings its big city knowledge to bear.

03

The pan-European Das-la Poste embodies the spirit of pure professionalism, and as former Olympian cyclists its riders have the gear to match.



FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 28 FEB / **PUB** 505 GAMES
DEV AVANTGARDEN / **PLAYERS** 1-2

Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons Remake

Fun for all the family

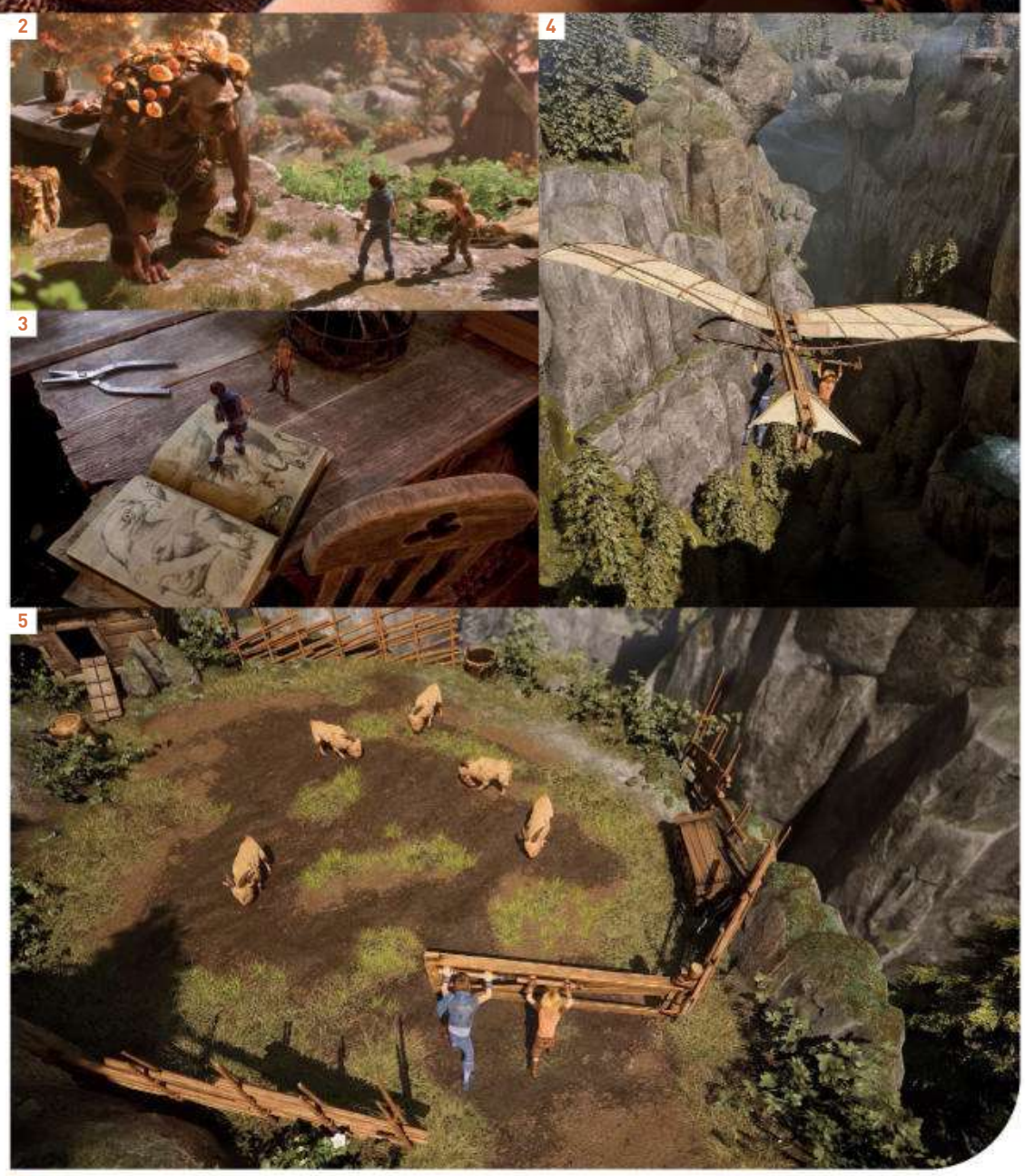
Has it really been just over ten years since Brothers was released? That's more than long enough to justify a remake. If you missed it the first time, you're in for a treat: two siblings set out to find a cure for their dying father, braving a world full of hazards.

While co-op play is an option, the game can be played solo – in which case you'll control both brothers at once, with each one assigned to a different half of the controller. You'll find controlling them becomes intuitive with surprising speed.

The game features the same ingenious platforming and puzzles as before, only smoother and shinier – and with additional secrets to discover. A sumptuous fantasy world, a touching depiction of family love, and a superb control scheme? It might be even better the second time around.

IMPRESSIONS

Sure to be welcomed back by existing fans, destined to create legions of new ones. This would have to do something very wrong to disappoint.



1 There's a real sense of love between the brothers, communicated despite the fictional language. 2 He looks like a fungi. 3 Like in any good fantasy tale, there are giants. 4 Operating this flying contraption naturally demands co-operation. 5 Teamwork makes the dream work!

Nothing is quite as it seems, including this couple's relationship, as you will find out.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 7 MAR / **PUB** INTERIOR NIGHT / **DEV** INTERIOR NIGHT / **PLAYERS** 1-8

As Dusk Falls

We're falling for this unique narrative adventure already

Storytelling has enjoyed the respect it deserves in the game industry for decades now, making experiences like *this* possible. It's almost certainly not what you expect. More interactive motion comic than visual novel, you'll take part in the semi-animated scenes via QTEs and by making decisions – which, from what we've seen, works surprisingly well.

This is a drama, telling a story much more grounded than your standard gaming fare. What begins as a family road trip collapses into a siege at a motel, and you'll see the tale from both the family's viewpoint, exploring the tensions between its members and how they might affect the characters' actions and choices, and that of the criminals who kicked off the siege, revealing why they're not simply two-dimensional bad guys.

"CONSEQUENCES VARY FROM THE INCONSEQUENTIAL TO THE TRAUMATIC."

DUSK CHAIR

The art style, based on actors playing out the scenes, is a fascinating fusion of realism and soft, watercolour-style tones. Speaking of actors, the voice cast differs from the model cast for some roles, and there's some gaming royalty in there. Elias Toufexis, perhaps best known as Deus Ex's Adam Jensen, is joined by Jane Perry (Diana in Hitman, Selene in Returnal). That alone adds to the appeal.

The experience hinges on player choices, of which there are *many*, and you'll have to make a decent number of significant decisions. While it will work perfectly as a solo experience, you'll have the option of playing with other people to share decisions, movie-night-style. Consequences will vary from the inconsequential to the traumatic, encompassing anger, revenge, love, death, and trust. There are even flashbacks that allow you to dictate what people knew or did in the past. We look forward to choosing!

IMPRESSIONS

An ambitious storytelling project, As Dusk Falls promises to weave a mature tale. It's going to make us wary of motels, though.

1

2

1 Luckily, he doesn't seem to understand how guns work. Still not a great situation, though. 2 Warning: this game is not suitable as driving test preparation. Well *probably* not.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 2024 / **PUB** ANNAPURNA INTERACTIVE
DEV HOLLOW PONDS, RICHARD HOGG / **PLAYERS** MULTI

Flock

Hold on to your hat

Hollow Ponds has the uncanny knack of making some of the most charming adventures ever created. Among its previous games, Hohokum lets you play as a sentient piece of silly string, Wilmot's Warehouse made us fall in love with the chores of warehouse work, and I Am Dead's gentle Yorkshireman Morris Lupton is everyone's favourite videogame grandpa. Now we have Flock, a creature collector adventure that has you take to the skies on the back of a giant bird.

You play as a flying shepherd; your Aunt Jane, a zoology professor, has asked you to help her complete an official guide to creatures by finding and identifying different adorable-looking critters in the wild. This means soaring through pretty alien landscapes, locating different beasties, and charming them to join your flock.

Finding these zippy little creatures is a pretty laid-back process – it's as simple as gliding around on your bird pal until you spot one. As you approach, you're given a list of descriptions and will need to pick the one that fits the creature: does it have vertical or horizontal stripes? Does it have yellow spots on its tail? After you've identified it correctly, your bestiary will update and you can be on your merry way.

FACTRICK

1. BIRD CALL

You need to collect different kinds of whistles if you want to charm every creature and add it to your flock.

2. SMOOTH CRIMINAL

Burgeling bewls are cute but notorious thieves, so check their dens and you might find some special items.

3. FLUFFY FRIENDS

You can shear the adorable hover sheep in your flock to create hats, cardigans, and socks. Mmm, cosy!

HERD MENTALITY

With a bit of luck and skill, you can charm these creatures to join your hovering herd. You need to get close to the creature, but not so close that they get scared and run away. When you're a comfortable distance you can toot your whistle to say hello. If done correctly they'll chirp back happily and join your flock, following closely behind you as you continue to zip through the sky with the world's smallest entourage.

Flying on the back of your bird bud feels effortless. Your feathered friend always stays the same height from the ground, meaning you only need to pay attention to the direction of your travel. If you come across an obstacle, your bird and creature posse will glide over it or pull the videogame trick of letting you pass through it. Hollow Ponds has made flying as undemanding as possible, and the result is truly agile aerial action.

IMPRESSIONS

Flock is pure whimsy. This gentle adventure has wonderful landscapes, adorable creatures, and activity that fully captures the joy of flight. Keep your eyes on the sky for this one next year.

TRACK RECORD As we mention above, Hollow Ponds specialises in utterly charming players. Publisher Annapurna Interactive is well known for finding and backing high-quality indie games, with its recent repertoire including Cocoon and Thirsty Suitors.

"FLYING ON THE BACK OF YOUR BIRD BUD FEELS EFFORTLESS."

Flock is co-op, so your friends can get involved and have their own weird bird legions.

The connection between music and environment is what makes Symphonia truly sing.

FORMAT TBC / **ETA** 2024 / **PUB** HEADUP PUBLISHING / **DEV** SUNNY PEAK / **PLAYERS** 1

Symphonia

Time to tune up

Sunny Peak's debut game is a showstopper. It's a gorgeous 2D adventure where you play as Philemon, a birdlike musical maestro who has an affinity with the violin. But their skills don't stop at banging out a cracking solo; they can also use their instrument to pull off some major platforming moves. A character with many strings to their bow, it would seem.

Violin in hand, Philemon sets off into the orchestral world of Symphonia to find its most prestigious musicians, who all have vanished. Music is the life source of this world so Philemon needs to get them back and reform Symphonia's orchestra pronto, or the threat of silence befalling the world will become a reality.

Platforming relies mainly on your bow. You can tap it quickly on the floor to give yourself a pogo-like jump or plant it in the ground and use it as a catapult to launch yourself great distances. Levels are a familiar mixture of moving and timed platforms, but layouts inspire speed and fluidity. Philemon's white suit and tailcoat almost evoke the look of a streamlined missile as you hop, leap, and soar through this musical world. Movement can at first feel lofty, but it doesn't take long to assimilate the game's rhythms and quickly slip into Symphonia's tempo.

One thing that particularly impresses us in our hands-on is how polished Symphonia looks. Philemon's task involves playing concertos in each realm, reawakening the land's sleeping machinery and convincing its prestigious musician to rejoin the orchestra. Each of the four areas is designed around a different part of the orchestral family, and each is more regal than the last. Backgrounds are full of depth, made only more majestic by the game's soft lighting that gives everything a glossy sheen. It's like every area is an elegant concert hall, an architectural feat to be marvelled at.

FACTRICK

1. SHOW TIME

Symphonia's soundtrack features the Scoring Orchestra Of Paris, which is incredibly cool.

2. GETTING ANIMATED

The opening animation in Symphonia's trailer was the work of Madrid-based Sunshine Animation Studio.

3. STAR STUDENTS

Isart Digital has its own itch.io page filled with games that students have made for their final-year projects.

CONCERTOED EFFORT

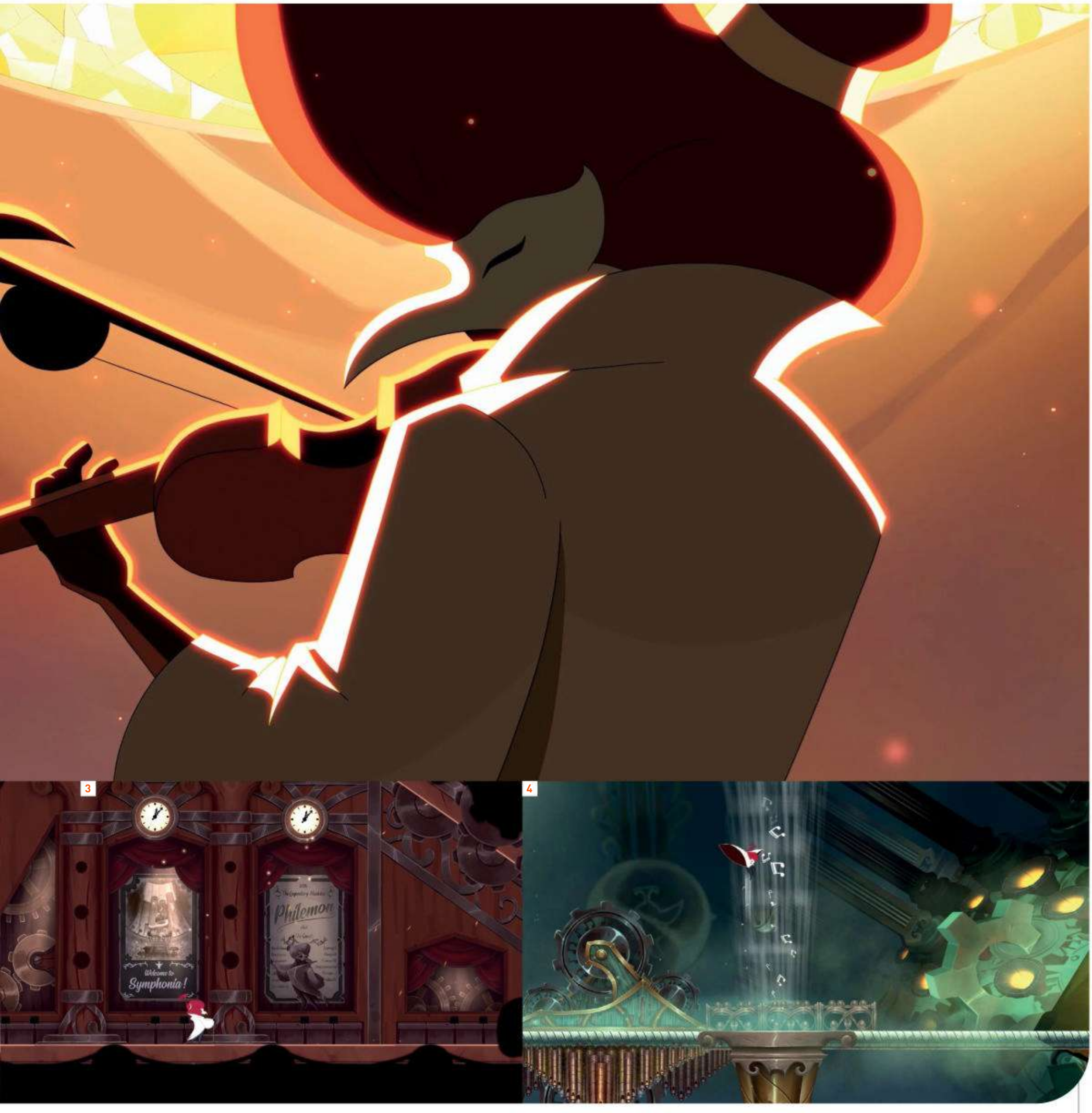
An incredible amount of attention has been paid to even the smallest of details. The game is stuffed with musical flourishes in sound and animation, such as how Philemon's movement lines are a subtle musical score or the way a sweep of sheet music indicates when your progress is saved. One fun musical embellishment is that when you die, the music is interrupted by a short, violin screech almost like the musician was aghast at your misstep – it's wonderful.

IMPRESSIONS

This charming, challenging platformer is music to our ears. The platforming could be tightened up a little, but developer Sunny Peak has a clear, artistic vision reflected in its rich, ambitious world.

TRACK RECORD New developer Sunny Peak is made up of alumni from the Paris-based videogame and 3D animation school Isart Digital, all of whom graduated in 2020. Symphonia's first build was part of the team's coursework. Consider us impressed!

1 Philemon wears a mysterious beaked mask, hiding their face. 2 There's no combat in Symphonia. Just beware of mean spikes and collapsing platforms. 3 If you look closely, Philemon's burgundy hair is in the shape of a musical note – cute! 4 Polished to perfection, this title's visuals *sing*. Okay, we're done...



Take a bow

Traversal is all about technique

01

If you get launched into the air while trying to track down the missing musos, you can use your white cape to glide back down for a safe landing.

02

Everything in Symphonia relates to music, so when you come to a locked door just crack out a quick violin solo and watch it magically open.

03

To breach large gaps, find some soft cushioning and plant your bow into it. Then gently bend and release the bow to catapult yourself through the air.

Exoborne

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** LEVEL INFINITE
DEV SHARKMOB / **PLAYERS** 1-3

Now here's an intriguing genre mashup, combining elements of open-world play, extraction missions, and survival. Success will depend on your setup almost as much as your skills. Playing alone or as part of a team, you'll venture out into a harsh world that you'll only be able to survive thanks to your highly customisable exosuit.

The weather (think intense storms, tornadoes, and potentially deadly lightning strikes) is just as likely to kill you as the enemies. Resources to craft better gear and weapons are out there for the taking, but you'll need to extract safely in order to keep them. An emphasis on verticality – your parachute and grappling hook will get a lot of use – works in tandem with the extreme weather events to ensure that each extraction run is unpredictable. You'll need to think on your exosuited feet.

Expeditions: A MudRunner Game

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 5 MAR
PUB FOCUS ENTERTAINMENT
DEV SABER INTERACTIVE / **PLAYERS** 1

Who knew that a game about driving cars where cars really, really shouldn't be driven would be so popular? Well, whoever knew may have anticipated this sequel, which provides players with a variety of new environments to navigate using off-road vehicles, plenty of tools, and a good understanding of physics.

A drone enables you to scout the area before you set off, and can help you locate extra equipment along your route. There's a base building and management element, too, as you set up camp and hire experts to develop your skills. Thick mud, deep water, rough ground, and treacherously steep slopes will be no match for the well-prepared explorer.

HappyFunland

FORMAT PSVR2 / **ETA** 2024
PUB SPECTRAL ILLUSIONS
DEV SPECTRAL ILLUSIONS / **PLAYERS** 1

You may not be shocked to learn that this game's title is a little misleading. You probably *also* won't be shocked to learn that there's a comedic edge to proceedings when you we tell you this theme park was the brainchild of a man named Mort Grisly – and the park mascot is called, er, Randy Rodent. Could Spectral Illusions be taking the Mickey with this one?

As it's a theme park, you get to go on lots of rides – in VR! Yay! However, there are murderous animatronics. Somewhat less yay. The park has a dark past, and you're going to learn all about it in a very conclusive, hands-on way. Engaging in combat, solving puzzles, and exploring the theme park will allow you to live to tell the tale... if you're lucky, that is.

Ib

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 14 MAR
PUB PLAYISM / **DEV** KOURI / **PLAYERS** 1

Don't be fooled by the 1990s RPG-style graphics; this is a 2D horror with multiple endings, and it's determined to disturb you. After being taken to an art gallery by her parents, a young girl realises that she is suddenly, utterly alone in the building. That's terrifying enough to begin with, but then she also learns that something is very wrong with her environment.

There are enemies in this game, but as Ib is a young girl, there's no combat. Emphasis is therefore on escaping and staying safe, while solving puzzles throughout the museum in an attempt to get back to your parents in the real world along with others you meet. The original version of this game was incredibly popular upon release in 2012, and soon you'll be able to see why via this remake.

Whisker Waters

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2024
PUB MERGE GAMES / **DEV** UNDERBITE GAMES **PLAYERS** 1

Are they making this game just for us? A PURRRRPG (our term, not theirs) where you get to play as an adorable, customisable little cat that loves fishing. There's a whole world to get your claws into, but fishing is front and centre in the experience. Well, cats *are* very food-motivated. There's lots of different fishing equipment to use and techniques to master and, naturally, all sorts of delicious fish to catch with them.

There are communities of cats (who also live alongside birds and bears) to find and chat to, who have tasks you can help with in exchange for cosmetics and useful gear. We've got a good feline about this one, and can't wait to see which fish we catch and characters we meet during the tail.

Garden Life: A Cozy Simulator

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 2024
PUB NACON / **DEV** STILLALIVE STUDIOS / **PLAYERS** 1

We enjoy saving worlds and beating up digital strangers just as much as you do, but it's always great to see developers take advantage of the fact that videogames can be pretty much anything. This one is setting itself up to be a chill, unique, pressure-free experience.

Procedural generation ensures each plant will be unique, while a variety of real-world flowers, fruits, vegetables, and shrubs to plant and maintain will give you plenty of scope to create the garden of your dreams. (Sunflowers or pumpkins? Or both?) There will be different weather to contend with, and fellow gardeners from your community to meet. With both story and sandbox modes, we're rooting for this garden sim.

Open Roads

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 22 FEB / **PUB** ANNAPURNA INTERACTIVE
DEV OPEN ROADS TEAM / **PLAYERS** 1

As a mother and daughter take a road trip, Open Roads explores a familial relationship rarely given any time or detail in highly publicised games. And with family secrets and the promise of a hidden treasure, it's ticking a lot of promising boxes, and just might deliver a heartfelt, memorable experience. Throw in the acting talents of Keri Russell (The Americans) and Kaitlyn Dever (Booksmart), and you have something that *just might* end up as one of the first 2024 GOTY contenders.

Mediterranea Inferno

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 5 MAR
PUB SANTA RAGIONE / **DEV** EYEGUYS, LORENZO REDAELLI / **PLAYERS** 1

We love a good visual novel here at PLAY, and this is certainly looking like a good visual novel. The striking art style pulls us in, and the thoughtful and mature subject matter makes us eager for the game's release. In part, it confronts the psychological impact of the isolation forced upon the world when Covid ran rampant in 2020. There's a dollop of fantasy in the story, but also some dark subject matter tackled head-on. You'll get to pick daily activities for three friends trying to kickstart their friendship that they were forced to put on hold; but humans aren't straightforward, and neither is this story...

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **/ ETA** 2 FEB **/ PUB** SEGA **/ DEV** ATLUS **/ PLAYERS** 1

Persona 3 Reload

Being a student was never this easy or stylish for us

We only review finished games, so in Viewpoint we go hands-on with near-final code of a game that just missed our review deadline. Jess Kinghorn heads to Gekkoukan High School, forging friendships with RPG favourites, about five hours in.

Fighting for the fate of the world was a lot more palatable back in 2008 for many of us. When you have your own bills to pay, it all hits closer to home. Still, when your friends need help, who can say no?

Since Persona 3's debut on PS2, multiple rereleases have followed, though none have been definitive. Reload continues that trend – if you loved Portable's female protagonist route or the epilogue dungeon found exclusively in FES, you'll be a tad disappointed by this. Focusing on *only* the core Persona 3 experience, what does Reload bring to the table?

First and foremost, a complete visual upgrade. It was a joy to see, um, SEES looking funky fresh in rhythm release Persona 3: Dancing In Moonlight, and that's built upon in Reload – the cast members have never looked better than they do here, both in 3D and completely original 2D animated cutscenes. P3 on PS2 boasted an atmosphere thick with existential dread, but flourishes within Reload's overhauled presentation really drive the unease home.

Speaking of changes, the English voices have been recast, while the soundtrack has been rerecorded. An all-new theme song features a melodic call back to Burn My Dread, but this is largely what we remember, just with fresh licks (of paint).

On the subject of nostalgic beats, we're still tied to 2009's calendar and period-accurate touches like flip phones, though when you check your messages with ▢ you're presented with a menu that looks more like a single-screen smartphone. Alongside arranging hangouts with social links, and mailing lists letting us know about sales at the pharmacy (stock up before heading back into the central dungeon, Tartarus), texts are where Reload's eccentric side peeks out. One message from Velvet Room attendant Elizabeth begins 'Greed is such a terrible sin. Alas, I cannot help but want, and now the number of requests I have for you has increased.' Amazing, no notes.

WAY OF LIFE

From Chairman Ikutsuki's love of puns to scenes like Yukari welcoming Fuuka to the Iwatodai dorm, all the story's greatest hits return – though with new verses squeezed in between.

When you explore Gekkoukan High itself you're no longer held at arm's length – you're even able to slightly zoom the camera in to get closer than ever before. Reload's immersive environments also feature a glimmer of something else, and a reason to hang back on fast travel: Twilight Fragments. Scoop up these blue shinies during the day, because they can make the night a whole lot easier; if you're set on an extended Tartarus climb, you can spend fragments to heal your party's HP and SP.

Upperclassmen Mitsuru requests we meet that evening; Chairman Ikutsuki has promised to swing by with gifts. Junpei wonders if it'll be something good, while Yukari is more realistic: "He's probably just gonna tell us some new joke he made up."

We ponder possible puns as we walk home with Chihiro Fushimi, the student council treasurer. When we reach the dorm this sweet, awkward girl pipes up that her house is in the opposite direction. Still, she appreciates the time we spent with her, triggering a fully reloaded rendition of 'I am thou, thou art I,' that hypes us up to rebuild this social link and fall in love all over again.

Ikutsuki rewards us with a new toy: Theurgy. Apparently meaning 'spiritual magic that could reach the gods' in Greek, these remarkable cartridges for the squad's Evokers offer special moves when the stakes are high and emotions even higher.

The reloaded Tartarus, retrofitted with Persona 5 Palace presentation, is the perfect setting for battle testing. You're still walloping shadows but now you're running through purple caverns and walloping stalagmites that drop helpful resources too.

Heading upstairs, the gang gets separated and archer Yukari gets cornered. Our blue-haired protagonist rushes to her aid, only to get knocked on his arse. Yukari, distressed that someone has been hurt while protecting her, harnesses the power of Theurgy. Tapping R2, we can unleash Yukari's signature attack, sending the enemy packing in a gust of wind without any cost to our HP or SP – she could hold her own all along.

Theurgy is a flashy addition to an already ironed-out, turn-based combat experience, but will it prove *too* frictionless? While losing chunks of progress after a round of bad luck in Tartarus on PS2 was hardly enjoyable, that struggle made overcoming the final act's despairing odds all the more poignant. Perhaps Reload's cover version will stand on its own two feet… or maybe it'll just make us hit replay on the PS2 classic.

VIEWPOINT

"AN EXTREMELY SLICK REMAKE. WHILE IT'S A JOY TO REUNITE WITH SEES, WE HOPE THIS EMOTIONAL ROLLERCOASTER OF AN RPG HASN'T LOST ITS HEART."

We'll have our full review of Persona 3 Reload in a future issue.

1 All-new mechanic Theurgy harnesses heightened emotions for a flashy signature attack. Shadows don't stand a chance against Yukari's Cyclone Arrow. 2 Akihiko is still a sweetheart who just wants to get stronger and do his best – shame his social link is strictly platonic... 3 With full control of your individual party members and all-new mechanics like Theurgy, it's easier than ever to deliver a smackdown to shadows. 4 The Velvet Room offers many ways to get stronger, either by fusing new Personas or netting rewards from Elizabeth's requests.

FORMAT PS5
ETA LATE 2024
PUB DON'T NOD
DEV DON'T NOD MONTREAL
PLAYERS 1

BE KIND,

Don't Nod Montreal creative director Michel Koch discusses new beginnings and **Lost Records: Bloom & Rage** with Jess Kinghorn

LOST RECORDS: BLOOM & RAGE

The right squad can lift you up – or drag you down. Will you lose yourself in this crowd from Don't Nod's latest?

LOST RECORDS: BLOOM & RAGE

Stop us if you've heard this before: gal pals reunite after a long time apart, confront something inexplicably weird together, and see their bond ultimately changed forever. Well, time-travelling teen drama Life Is Strange debuted in 2015, arguably putting developer Don't Nod on the map for choice-driven narrative games, but this is not *that* story.

The recently announced Lost Records: Bloom & Rage is, in many ways, a return to Don't Nod's roots, but that's not the whole picture. That said, it is best to start with the most obvious questions. Chatting with Michel Koch, Bloom & Rage's creative director and previously co-director on Life Is Strange, we ask how he feels about the inevitable comparisons between the two projects.

He tells us, "I mean, personally I feel good about this comparison."

He goes on to say, "There is a DNA that is shared from our previous games, and what we're trying to do is to iterate and innovate on what we did before."

The DNA metaphor is appropriate, as Michel Koch is reuniting with both writer Jean-Luc Cano and producer Luc Baghadoust for Bloom & Rage's fresh fable – though this band aren't content to simply go on performing their greatest hits. As the first project from Don't Nod's new Montreal-based studio, it's the start of a fresh verse, developed in-house and already set to be self-published, so Don't Nod will retain the right to potentially spin up new albums of story in this universe for many years to come.

Music is a central part of this squad's identity – but that doesn't mean the vibe between the girls has always been harmonious.

Almost four years ago, as Don't Nod was wrapping up Life Is Strange 2 (a series which the publisher, Square Enix, now owns the IP rights to), the team began to discuss with writer Jean-Luc Cano what they'd make next. Even early on, they knew they wanted to tell another tale centring on at least two female protagonists.

"[What] sparked the project," Koch begins, "was really just this idea of a group of friends that would have not seen each other for a long period of time, that would meet again as adults, where they would have to rediscover just what's happened in the past."

Lost Records: Bloom & Rage tells a dual-timeline story about high-school besties Swann, Nora, Autumn, and Kat. In the summer of '95, they experience something so strange that all four girls swear to never speak to one another again. Ultimately, they keep the peace for 27 years before fate forces them back together.

When we try to pry on the subject of the cast, Koch is secretive, saying, "We cannot say much more about them for now. You've seen them, [but] you don't know who is who."

During our chat, we do glean a few harmonious details beyond the leads' names. The cast, like many Don't Nod protagonists, are "underdogs for various reasons." The team drew inspiration from the '90s riot grrrl and grunge music scenes, imbuing the squad with shared musical ambitions that sees them band together in the face of adversity within the male-dominated space. Now *that's* squad goals.

HIT IT!

The group's dynamic is central to the story, your choices influencing the push and pull between the four leads. A mix of frontwomen extroverts and shoegazing introverts, this blend was designed to "[show] that you don't have to be all exactly the same to develop a strong friendship."

Two dev team members in particular helped hone this girl gang. Narrative designer Nina Freeman first rose to prominence with her semi-

LIFE GOES ON

Running through the history of Don't Nod on PlayStation

2013

After about five years in development Remember Me debuted on PS3, imagining a futuristic dystopia where memories can be easily manipulated. Protagonist Nilin remixes other characters' recollections in a desperate fight to alleviate her own amnesia.

2015

Life Is Strange's five episodes were first released individually over the course of ten months. Aspiring photographer Max Caulfield reunites with childhood bestie Chloe Price, and the pair soon unearth a dark mystery at the heart of their seaside town.

2018

Vampyr is set in the wake of World War 1, at the height of the Spanish influenza pandemic. As a freshly awoken creature of the night, Doctor Jonathan Reid finds himself constantly torn between taking blood to survive and doing no harm to the people around him.

2018

The Awesome Adventures Of Captain Spirit was released shortly after Vampyr, telling a self-contained, heartfelt story about an imaginative and gifted little boy while also offering a glimpse of Don't Nod's next project, which would launch in September that same year.

LOST RECORDS: BLOOM & RAGE

Will a robust buddy system save this spooky woodland walk? Probably not but you can't blame us for trying.

"IN THE SUMMER OF '95 THE GIRLS EXPERIENCE SOMETHING SO STRANGE THAT THEY SWEAR NEVER TO SPEAK TO ONE ANOTHER AGAIN."

autobiographical 2015 work Cibele, a PC game-within-a-game recounting a romantic relationship that blossoms across both real and virtual realms. Freeman went on to contribute to the design of Fullbright's 2018 story-heavy science-fiction game Tacoma, and Koch credits her with playing a major role in "[shaping] the characters, their voices," for Lost Records: Bloom & Rage.

Koch also spotlights the contributions of writer and narrative designer Desiree Cifre. Since joining the studio in 2021, Cifre has written a great deal of the project's dialogue, contributing significantly to the voice of the core cast both in their teenage years and their adulthood. The contrast between the two time periods is the seed the project bloomed from.

Koch says, "We were just wanting to play with this idea of group friendship today versus in the past: how things

2019

Life Is Strange 2 introduced the world to protagonist Sean Diaz and his superpowered brother Daniel. The pair's journey across America unfolded over the course of five episodes. Series Publisher Square Enix has retained the rights to the Life Is Strange IP ever since.

2020

Twin Mirror was developed as another episodic mystery series, though this format was ultimately scrapped. Even though fantastical presentation is afforded to protagonist Sam Higgs' mind palace, there are otherwise no explicitly supernatural elements.

2023

Harmony: The Fall Of Reverie is another mystery title playing around with time, as lead heroine Polly can see into the future. In the wake of her mother's disappearance, Polly finds herself searching for answers in the parallel world of Reverie.

2023

Jusant sees you climbing a strange, multifaceted tower that seemingly stretches ever upwards. Telling a subtle tale that heavily relies on environmental storytelling, this was a pleasant surprise when it was released late last year – we gave it 9/10.

2024

In a similarly action-combat-packed vein to Vampyr, Banishers: Ghosts Of New Eden tells a love story that pierces the veil between life and death. It'll be released on 13 February on PS5 (new-gen only) – keep your eyes peeled for our thoughts in an upcoming issue.

change, how you can [become] friends again – or not – and how the shared memories can be something interesting to build a story about."

Finding your place amid all of this is an important beat, as Koch tells us, "You will be kind of recreating the group story and the group relationship [through your choices] – who was close to who?"

"We really want to play with this notion of group dynamics," he later goes on to say, "of what kind of friendship or more than friendship or tensions can be created within a group of people."

These binding ties are a powerful force throughout the story, exploring questions like 'does being part of a group really make you stronger, or sometimes does being part of a group [push] you to make decisions that may be against your own beliefs?' It seems one truth holds true in both time periods, and that's 'peer pressure is *real*.'

TOTALLY NON-HEINOUS

You'll alternate between the girls' teenage years and their present-day reconnection decades later, shaping both versions of the core cast through your decisions. Koch elaborates, "As you play both timelines you will reconnect and reconstruct what happened back then – what happened during the summer of '95?"

The '90s setting was an obvious choice for the team.

Koch quips, "One easy answer [why] is because we're old, and we were teenagers back then."

Though many of the team members grew up in France, they spent their teen years enjoying a lot of American pop culture. As such, Don't Nod's latest takes liberal inspiration from a range of '90s bangers including The X-Files, Twin Peaks, and Buffy. Koch adds to this list, saying "We grew up in the '90s reading every Stephen King book. I still read his books today, his new ones." He later reveals, "When we decided that the time gap in our game would be for 27 years, it's definitely not a coincidence – it was a small homage to It [by] Stephen King."

We've seen their faces, even know their names, but this girl gang is still full of surprises.

Sticking with the aforementioned musical theme and following it through to a punny reading of the title 'Lost Records,' physical media of this era plays a role beyond nostalgia.

"Without spoiling too much?" Koch says. "Yes, physical media will have some importance in the plot, and even, I would say, in the gameplay."

The idea is to showcase nostalgic artefacts, like VHS tapes and plastic toys, to audiences both similar in age to the band's adult selves and their younger years. Koch explains, "Hopefully, the older generation, like ourselves, will like it for what it was – for just nostalgia on teenagehood. And the younger generation will love it for having this kind of weird vision of 'What were those things? What are those objects? What is this tape used for?'"

After all, throwback nostalgia doesn't just affect those who lived it the first time around.

He continues, "I mean, we've seen a lot of those memes on the internet where you see a young kid or teenager with just a [cassette] tape and a pencil and they don't have any idea of how both of them could be used together." Beyond affectionate teasing of the young 'uns, Lost Records: Bloom & Rage looks set to leave players on both sides of the generational divide feeling painfully seen later this year.

"AS YOU PLAY BOTH TIMELINES YOU WILL RECONNECT AND RECONSTRUCT [...] WHAT HAPPENED DURING THE SUMMER OF '95."

LOST RECORDS: BLOOM & RAGE

A playful sense of 90's nostalgia showcases artefacts of yesteryear, but memories on tape might just reveal something new...

ARISEN AGAIN

Alan Wen lists why playing **Dragon's Dogma 2** should be your next RPG vocation

FORMAT PS5 **ETA** 22 MAR **PUB** CAPCOM **DEV** CAPCOM **PLAYERS** 1 (WITH SOME SOCIAL FEATURES)

The threat a tyrannical dragon presents to a fantasy world. A chosen hero whose heart was ripped out by that same dragon. Peculiar companions aiding said hero to slay said dragon, and all the other fearsome enemies that stand in their way. If that sounds familiar, then you're among those who had the good fortune to discover Dragon's Dogma the first time around.

More than a decade on, Capcom is determined to make the sequel to the cult classic a bona fide hit, using the power of PS5 to fully realise director Hideaki Itsuno's original vision. In a post-Elden Ring and post-Baldur's Gate 3 landscape, Dragon's Dogma 2 has the potential to appeal to both RPG camps, with a captivating world full of unexpected adventure and challenge matched by a lively party to make every experience eventful. 2024's going to be packed with huge releases, but here's why this is an unmissable RPG you'll want to get dogmatic about.

01

Dragon's gen

Capcom finally goes current-gen-exclusive

While PS5 is in its fourth year, Dragon's Dogma 2 is officially Capcom's first current-gen exclusive. (Resident Evil Village was originally intended to be the first, but the publisher later announced a PS4 version.) The ambitious scope of this game, however, means a last-gen port is unlikely to be made without compromises. While specific hardware features haven't been confirmed, we're hoping there will still be options for graphics and performance modes, or even better, a high framerate option.

You probably shouldn't chuck your PS4 on the fire, but look, it has been almost five years now. [*No!* – Mim]

Verdum has as familiar a verdant fantasy look as Gransys, but it's a new location, honest.

02

Worlds collide

Explore a large but dense fantasy world

Sequels tend to be designed to be bigger and better, and in terms of size, Capcom promises Dragon's Dogma 2's seamless open world map is four times larger than that of its predecessor. It's spread over two kingdoms, Vermund and Battahl, the latter a nation of humanoids known as beastren.

Of course, the first game's map wasn't exactly huge – about 60% the size of Skyrim's – but we shouldn't get bogged down in square feet when what matters is *density*. Travelling as a party without a mount, you can't just climb or fly everywhere, and that need to put in some work to get around makes for a much more grounded and considered world.

Not all games need gliders, but if you can use a monster as a makeshift one, why not?

03

Gripping combat

Climbing colossal beasts

The dragon may be your primary target, but you'll face plenty of other huge beasts in Dragon's Dogma 2, and instead of simply slashing at their feet, melee-based players can employ more tactile strategies. Channelling Monster Hunter and Shadow Of The Colossus, you can grip and then climb enemies to reach their weak points, such as a Cyclops' eye, as long as you don't get flung off.

You're not limited to grabbing hold of the larger monsters either; you could evade a swarm of smaller harpies by grabbing onto the legs of one of them, possibly dragging it out of the air in the process!

04

Pawn stars

Steadfast companions to recruit and fight alongside

Although Dragon's Dogma 2 is a single-player game, you have a party of capable companions, making it feel like you're playing with others. That's all thanks to the series' most unique feature: pawns.

How should we describe them? They're not actually people even though they look like them – they don't have their own will but they're also not merely fleshy robots. They essentially live to serve the Arisen. Which makes travelling with them more reliable than matching up with a random who either doesn't know what they're doing or is so good that they show you up.

What makes pawns even more special is that you can create one of your own, and recruit two more belonging to other players, which

That pawns aren't really human and in possession of free will perhaps explains the uncanny look of their eyes.

"You can create a pawn of your own, and recruit two belonging to other players."

means your party is always uniquely your own. Indeed, there's a lot of variety to this system as the other two pawns don't level up with you, so you're encouraged to hire new ones constantly to mix things up. Which isn't to say they're all single-serving allies; as they still level up with their own Arisen, you might rehire one later on to find that they've been away.

They're also far more talkative than they were in the first game, conversing with both the Arisen and each other, giving the impression that you're roaming with a bunch of LARPers, in the best way possible. Given they were inspired by the unpredictable and reactive nature of GTA V's NPCs (revealed by Itsuno in an interview with VGC), expect pawns to make your adventures all the more memorable.

Q&A

Battle-hardened

Director Hideaki Itsuno on all monsters big and small

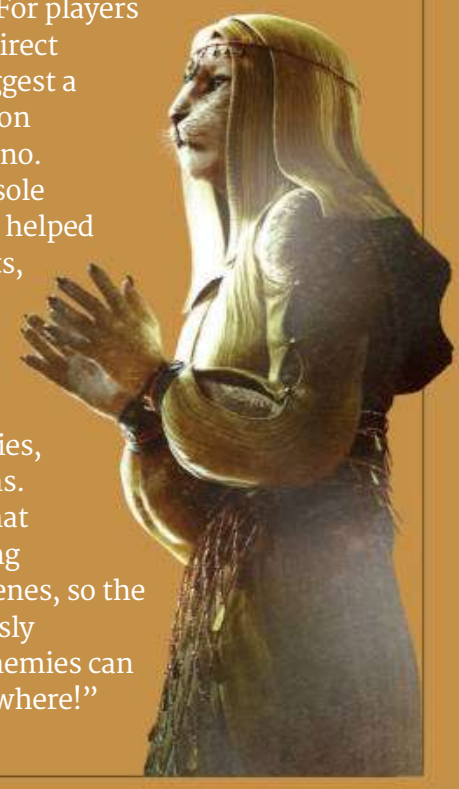
While the original Dragon's Dogma had the Arisen and their pawns tackling some huge beasts, this sequel takes that and goes even bigger. The massive Talos, for instance, a huge stone puppet that stomps through the world, is awe-inspiring. So, we ask Hideaki Itsuno, how do you make a fight like that work?

"It is very difficult to design the gameplay for the player fighting a massive enemy while letting them feel they are on an equal footing," admits Itsuno, "so you have to have ideas for gameplay that goes beyond basic one-to-one combat." That means making sure such encounters are designed early enough to ensure "the terrain and storyline can accommodate it in a way that feels natural."

But small creatures like goblins need to feel just as satisfying to take on. "This is where the experience and knowhow of the action team here at Capcom comes in!" says Itsuno when we ask how they prolong that excitement across the many scraps with smaller foes. "We consider a variety of factors, including the kind of behaviour that can be imagined or expected from an enemy's appearance, the patterns and tells it will have, the balance between when the player will be able to judge enemy behaviour and how long it will take on their part to react appropriately to it, and how many different types of behaviour the enemy has."

You'll have loads of options with your vocation (character class, essentially) as well, though taking charge of a non-direct damage dealer like Trickster won't make for an easy mode. "For players who struggle with direct combat, I would suggest a magic-based vocation instead," notes Itsuno.

Current-gen console technology has also helped make improvements, such as the "increased intelligence" of those around you, from NPCs to enemies, and even your pawns. Itsuno highlights that "there are no loading screens between scenes, so the world feels seamlessly interconnected – enemies can truly chase you anywhere!"



05

All Arisen welcome

A diverse fantasy adventure

Where many games with a medieval Western fantasy aesthetic make the mistake of not featuring non-white characters (looking at you, Final Fantasy XVI), you should expect Dragon's Dogma 2 to have a wide range of faces, and not only because players can create their own Arisen and pawns. This world isn't just limited to vanilla humans, either; there are also humanoid beastren, who can join you on your adventures, plus the more elusive elves.

"You should expect Dragon's Dogma 2 to have a wide range of human faces."

Brant, the captain of Vermund's palace guard, is one of many characters the Arisen can co-operate with.

Forget git gud – git smart and use all the tools and environments available to you.

06

Environmental planning

Exploiting your surroundings

The physicality of the world will greatly aid you in a scrap. For instance, you could be fighting a monster by a stream – so why not save yourself the effort and allow the current to sweep them away? And if you see foes ready to ambush you from a bridge, instead of fighting them head-on, why not blow up the bridge instead?

You don't have to rely on sticking to the roads to get from A to B either. You're not able to scale cliffs but you *can* clamber up ledges around your height, and slide down slopes to avoid taking fall damage.

The breadth of RE Engine games coming from Capcom has been a kind of sorcery.

07

Moonstruck

RE Engine continues to impress

Since Resident Evil VII, Capcom's RE Engine just keeps shooting for the moon (which is what it's named after), evolving into an incredibly versatile internal engine. It's certainly been used to create larger releases that play with considerably more real estate, including Resident Evil 4 and Street Fighter 6's World Tour mode, but Dragon's Dogma 2 will be the engine's biggest test yet – it's the first open world game made on the engine. Given its flawless track record to date, expect a smooth landing.

08

Riddle me this

Many more surprises await

There's still plenty we don't know about Dragon's Dogma 2, such as how its relationship system works – the one in the original game can culminate in some very unexpected romances, but then that's the kind of weirdness you don't really want to know too much about until you play a game for yourself. We do, however, know that one thing hidden in the game is the sphinx, a monster that featured in the Japan-exclusive Dragon's Dogma Online. If you're familiar with this mythical beast, you'll know that confronting it's going to be anything but straightforward, at least if you want to get hold of treasure locked behind its scheming riddles. *Romance* it? Oh, you… We don't think so.

The Sphinx may love riddles but this is still an action game, not a quiz.

Q&A

To our ears

Members of Dragon's Dogma 2's sound team, er, sound off!

Bring to mind your favourite fantasy world in games or even films, and your mind will most likely be awash with its melodies – music can be vital to the experience. Lead composer Satoshi Hori's aim "was to make the player's sense of the expansive, atmospheric world and the tension of combat more vivid through music." While the score is rooted in a "classical music language" to match its genre, Hori says you can sense a modern approach in the end result. But also core to DD2's identity is "the necessity of pauses of musical silence, in which we deliberately do not provide a musical score, and so when the music finally kicks in it feels even more epic."

Sound director Ryo Yoshii also stresses the importance of knowing when less is more, saying the team had to work together to make sure the world felt genuinely immersive, including working out how best to mix "impactful, action-oriented sound effects" with the sounds of the "beautiful world" creating something that "lets players feel both the stillness and movement of the world in a more natural way."

"[Pauses mean] when the music finally kicks in it feels even more epic."

Creating the sounds for monsters meant making them feel just as much a part of the world as your character. "When speaking with the director about the sound design for the game, I distinctly remember him saying that he wanted us to meet expectations without being predictable," shares Yoshii. "Keeping these words in mind, we used foley recordings to give the monsters that live in this world an organic feel, while remaining aware of the need to ensure it still felt good as an action game."

To further increase your immersion, the team has included 3D audio. "Our approach was one of 'added value'. The feature is mainly designed to emphasise the feeling of an expansive space using sound," shares Yoshii – though at the same time the sound team have worked to ensure the audio is just as good for players without the 3D tech.

09

Gis a job

Nine vocations to alter your fighting style

You can keep your fancy degrees; slaying monsters is one heck of a vocation.

10

Heart of darkness

Reclaim your heart, and carve your own path

While the Arisen's destiny is to slay the dragon and reclaim their heart, how they carry that out will differ from player to player. Across Verdum and Battahl are travellers, merchants, soldiers, and many others that exist independently of you, living their ordinary lives, but who may have favours to ask and quests that you can accept, helping you learn more about the world. Indeed, how you go about carrying out these quests can also depend upon the pawns travelling with you, as some may have knowledge about things you don't. At the end of the day, it's also up to you whether you take on quests or accept a pawn's guidance. ■

Elves speak their own language, but maybe you can find a pawn who understands their tongue.

Rather than creating a character of a class that you then have to stick to, you can take on and switch between different vocations for your Arisen, adapting to the challenges that face you as you see fit or experimenting outside of your comfort zone if you like.

Naturally, there's your tried-and-true sword-and-shield Fighter, but if you prefer to keep your distance you could be an Archer or a Mage, the latter also able to use spells to enhance their party. If you enjoy being cunning, you'll want to be a Thief – swift and able to dodge attacks before returning with a deadly counter while pilfering from NPCs and enemies alike.

Each vocation specialises in particular weapons, so, for instance, the Warrior can wield powerful two-handed weapons while the most advanced magick is reserved for the Sorcerer, who can hold a large staff with both hands. Exclusive to the Arisen, there are also vocations like Magick Archer or Mystic Spearhand that give you the best of both physical and magick power, though being able to switch jobs means there's flexibility no matter what vocation you take.

We are, however, most excited by the newest vocation, Trickster, which allows you to use a unique weapon, the Censer, to conjure illusions, tricking enemies into fighting one another or even jumping off a cliff. This game's set to be filled with unpredictable and potentially hilarious moments that you'll be eager to share, and this feels like the perfect vocation for that.

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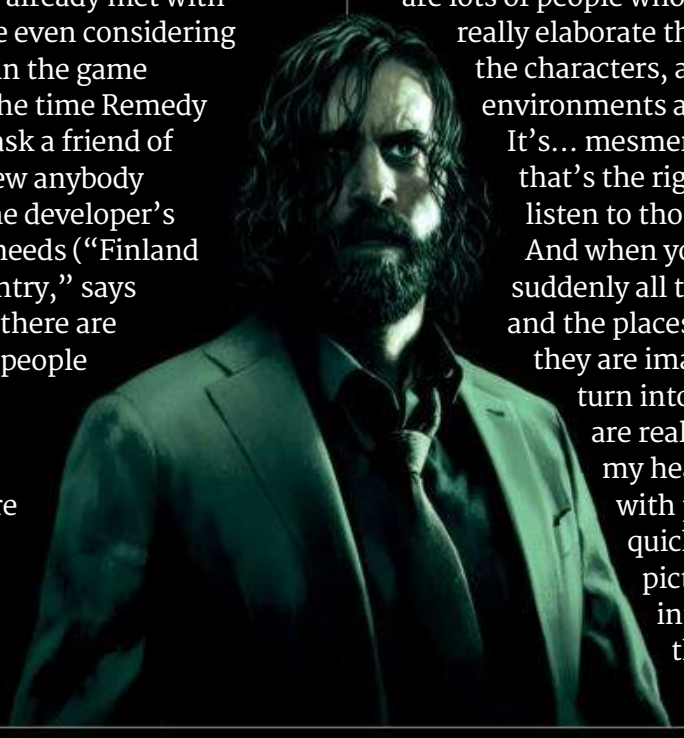
HITTING THE WRITE NOTES

Petri Alanko talks to Luke Kemp about music, creativity, and how the **Alan Wake** games are more than merely titles he's worked on

You cannot have a serious discussion about Remedy Entertainment without talking about Petri Alanko. His unique, layered music has been an integral part of the studio's output for almost 15 years, and, as we learn, he has connected with the games that he's worked on – the Alan Wake ones in particular – on a deep emotional level.

Alanko had already met with success before even considering working within the game industry. By the time Remedy happened to ask a friend of his if they knew anybody suitable for the developer's composition needs ("Finland is a small country," says Alanko, "and there are only so many people dealing with music. Especially people who are able to do both classical and pop music"), he had already toured with bands and spent a while working for Warner Chappell Music. Yet his story only gets more interesting from there.

Something immediately strikes us as Alanko begins to explain how he works. "I happen to like Remedy's way of storytelling," he says. "There are lots of people who are able to really elaborate the stories, and the characters, and the environments and so forth. It's… mesmerising, I think that's the right word, to listen to those stories. And when you listen, suddenly all the characters and the places, although they are imaginary, they turn into reality. They are real places inside my head. I work with pictures very quickly and when pictures are born into my mind, they are easy



Alanko uses his own collection of sounds to draw upon when composing.

Alanko composed music for each Alan Wake game, as well as for the original's DLC.

to compose to. I see a picture in my head, I hear a melody."

A question occurs to us. "Do you have synaesthesia?" we ask.

SOUND IT OUT

Alanko confirms that he does. This means, in his case, that he can hear images and see sounds (see 'Talking pictures'). "That was a major handicap when I was a little kid, because people usually didn't understand at school. I go to the piano and bang down a chord, for instance, F sharp major, and I tell the teacher 'This sounds like steel blue'. And he looks at me like, okay, this is enough for me to go to counselling or whatnot."

Fortunately, Alanko later moved to a school better suited to musically gifted children – and in a remarkable stroke of luck, had a teacher with similar experiences. "We got along really well and he was able to nourish my ability to pick up things from let's say, colours and shapes and movement and people and so forth. It was sheer luck to have that kind of teacher [at such a young age]. It could have been quite different otherwise."

"IF I BUY A NEW SYNTHESISER, I USUALLY ZERO IT AND BUILD A SOUND SET OF MY OWN. [...] IT'S MORE OR LESS LIKE ARTISAN WOODWORKING."

Alanko's audition for Remedy was to score some footage of a valley flyover, taken from the first Alan Wake game.

Music began playing in his head the second the footage began, and this music matched note for note what he wrote, recorded, and then turned in. "I used to fight against that," Alanko explains, "because I thought it's too easy." He would therefore write multiple versions of a piece, moving further and further from that original music. He found, however, that it would always end up being the versions closest to what initially played in his head that were preferred.

"Probably the last ten years or so I've been trusting the gut feeling, the intuition. Intuition usually leads to inspiration and from there, something starts to ring in my head. I like to say that it's a puzzle in my head, and I need to reverse that puzzle into the real world. So it's like, I take the corner pieces first, and then connect the corners, and then try to figure out where there's buildings, and sky, and grass [...] It sounds really abstract this way, but I haven't found any better way to explain how my brain works."

Alanko doesn't just pick things apart and put them back together in an abstract way; he does it in a very real way, too. "I have a very profound hatred of factory presets," he tells us. "If I buy a new synthesiser, I usually zero it and build a sound set of my own. [...] I guess it's more or less like artisan woodworking. If you're using factory presets or ready-built sounds, you're basically putting together an Ikea bed or table, or something."

COMPOSABLE FIGURE

Alanko prefers to, as he puts it, "use my own timber". This approach is

WAKE UP

Alanko delivered the goods for these Remedy games

ALAN WAKE (2010)

The first Remedy game to feature Petri Alanko's music, which he started composing in 2004.

ALAN WAKE'S AMERICAN NIGHTMARE (2012)

Unfortunately not part of the PlayStation remaster (yet, anyway), this bite-size release gets into the business with Mr Scratch.

QUANTUM BREAK (2016)

Due to Xbox exclusivity it's only tangentially part of the RCU, though we'd love to see this experimental TV-episode integrating adventure reborn one day.

CONTROL (2019)

The unique atmosphere would be almost entirely absent without Alanko's excellent audio work.

ALAN WAKE 2 (2023)

The story and gameplay took a sharp turn away from the first game, and the soundtrack did likewise.

TALKING PICTURES

Synaesthesia comes in multiple varieties. Fundamentally, somebody who is synaesthetic will have two different senses linked in a way that somebody who is not synaesthetic does not experience. While Alanko sees a note as a colour, for example, somebody else may associate colours with numbers, or see a shape when hearing a sound. There's even a form of synaesthesia where hearing certain words triggers certain tastes. Famous synaesthetes include David Hockney, Pharrell Williams, and Marilyn Monroe.

Did you know Alanko releases music under the name Lowland? Check it out!

also appropriate for game development because, as he observes, the developers have to build everything from scratch, so why shouldn't he? It usually takes him three to six months to build a new library of sounds, but once he has it, he has a unique audio spectrum to draw from that he feels is ideal for the current project.

He works a lot with 'found sounds'. That is, he'll make recordings out in the world and then use them in his work, often manipulating them in some way first. Sometimes he'll be after a specific sound, sometimes he'll happen to pick something up that strikes him as perfect for a particular piece. Sometimes, though, he'll *mimic* sounds. "With Quantum Break, the piano ostinato thing, it originally was a rusty gate that kept screeching when it opened slowly. I couldn't use [the recording], so I replaced the notes with piano, but they are the exact notes that the gate played when it opened."

Alanko works incredibly closely with the team at Remedy every step of the way. This means that the content of the game can and will have a direct, meaningful impact on the fine detail of the score. "For instance, with Control, we had this idea that something is so evil, that it basically has gravity; it distorts the sounds, and it distorts the harmonic overtones of sounds. So something might sound like viola or cello, but there's something really disturbing about the sound because the overtones are

PlayStation never got a Quantum Break port, which is a shame; it's pretty good.

LAKE AT ME NOW

Alanko has regular 'coffee talks' with Remedy to start finding the shape of what's needed musically. "I had a lot of discussions with Sam Lake about what we could do. And he had lots of marvellous ideas. And, of course, we also have to take into account Finnish musical heritage. In Control, we had a tango, and we had a twang guitar combo track that Ahti the janitor sings, and so forth. We basically tried to insert as many Finnish inside jokes into the game as possible."

slightly misaligned. That same idea is incorporated with something that I did with Alan Wake 2."

I GOT THE REMEDY

"Every time Scratch [appears], it sounds like metal screeching, but it's actually a trombone played by yours truly, and I'm the world's worst trombone player to be honest. It's been mangled through a processor that mixes up the harmonic overtones, and then it's being run through this –" he shows us what appears to be some kind of cooking pot – "and I attach very tiny speakers and microphones." Alanko then demonstrates the very satisfying CLANG! the pot makes when struck while hanging up. "I did an impulse response of that, and processed that earlier-mentioned badly played trombone through *that*." By then lowering that clanging sound a few octaves, Alanko gets a "church bell from hell".

While the Alan Wake soundtrack was primarily played by a string orchestra, the sequel's music uses very little of this, instead leaning heavily into a much darker and disturbing audio landscape. Alan was trapped in The Dark Place for 13 years, which would undoubtedly have had an effect on his state of mind. Therefore, the soundtrack needed to morph accordingly.

During the course of Alan Wake 2, Saga and Alan's experiences start off markedly differently, with occasional clashes and a gradual merging. This needed to be reflected in the soundtrack. Alanko explains

Control's fusion of the prosaic and the twisted is reflected in the soundtrack.

"[Saga's] world starts to have all kinds of spiky effects and echoes from Alan's world. And they find a means to communicate at times. And at some point, the worlds sort of merge. That point is when the two worlds sound identical, and afterwards Saga's world is turning into sheer hell [...] Alan's world is suddenly getting much easier, he's come back to *this* world and his instrumentation becomes more clear and saner, whereas Saga confronts all the madness, until towards the end, they unite again."

"AT SOME POINT [IN ALAN WAKE 2] THE WORLDS SORT OF MERGE. THAT POINT IS WHEN THE TWO WORLDS SOUND IDENTICAL."

SCORE EXERCISES

Alanko is now such a vital part of Remedy's development process, he gets involved with each game at an incredibly early stage, and doesn't step back until the project is done. "Actually, I think my Alan Wake 2 gig began before I had finished Control," he says. "It was probably the last three, four months, I was doing both Alan Wake 2 and Control at the same time; then a short vacation, and then continue with Alan Wake. I find it actually quite beneficial to work like that, especially when we're dealing with the RCU [Remedy Connected Universe]."

Alan Wake has been, and continues to be, a major part of Alanko's life. Although the first game was released in 2010, he first started writing music for it in August 2004, meaning he's been working on Alan Wake games for almost 20 years. With the passion he clearly has both for that world and for his work, we have to ask: how did it feel to finally finish his work on Alan Wake 2, and have to let go?

"I remember how sad I was when the first one was done," says Alanko. "[Finishing work on the sequel] was times ten. And although I'm quite sure that I'll be doing DLCs and things like that, I seriously hope that we haven't ended Alan's story yet. I'm still hoping that we will get another sequel, but that's just my guess. I feel rather sore, to be honest; sad and sore. I composed seven hours and 14 minutes of material for Alan Wake 2. If I calculated correctly, six hours and 33 minutes was used more or less, here and there. Tiny pieces here, tiny pieces there. And the remaining tracks were more or less the ones that could not be used within that plotline. So maybe something can be used with DLCs. I don't know if the gig is over yet. Psychologically, it isn't."

As Saga's story progresses, noises from Alan's world enter the soundtrack to hers.

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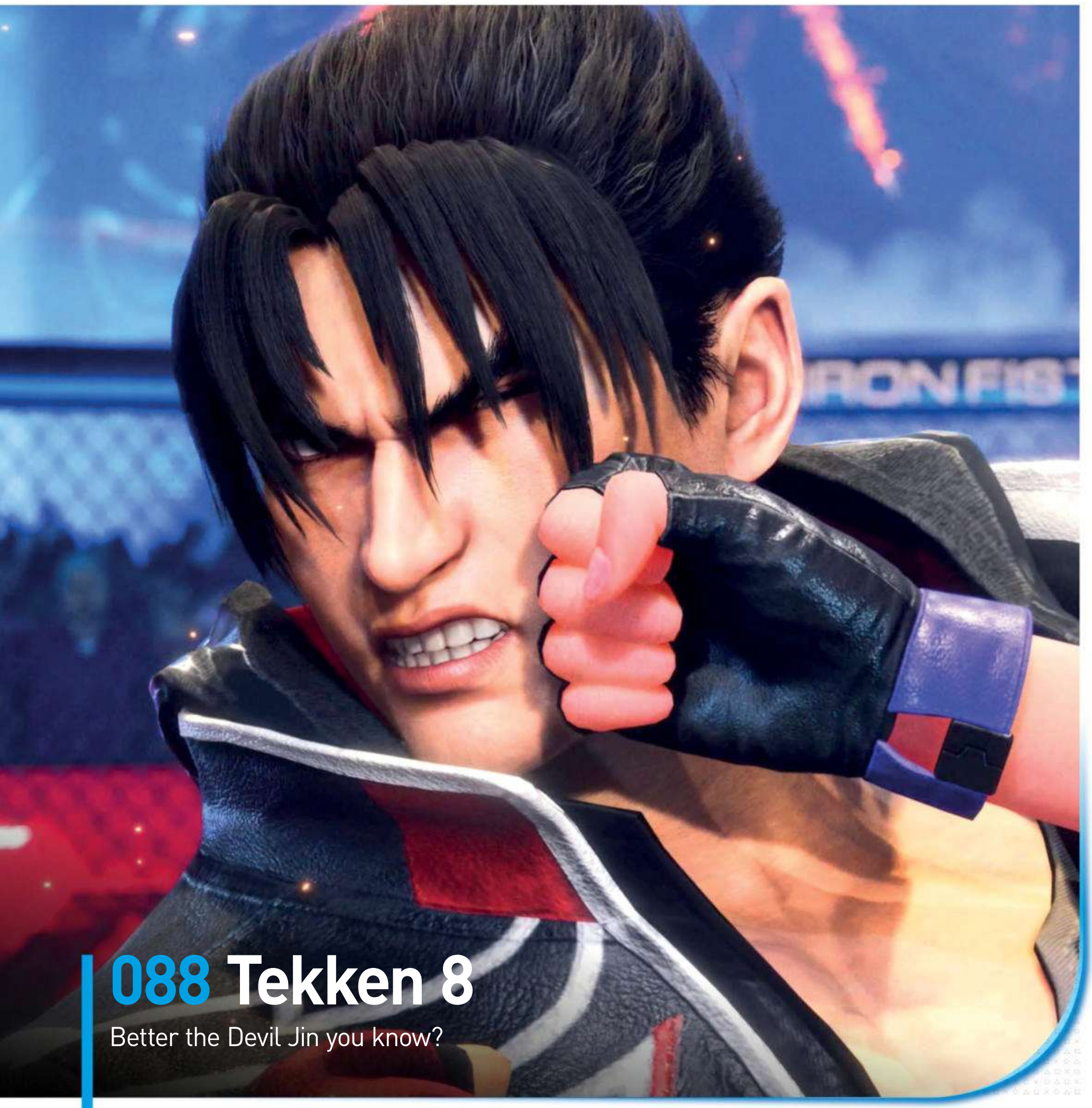
"SARGON IS A DELIGHT TO CONTROL."

082 Prince Of Persia: TLC



088 Tekken 8

Better the Devil Jin you know?

HIGHLIGHTS

LIKE A DRAGON: INFINITE WEALTH 072 | LOOT RIVER 078 | BAHNSEN KNIGHTS 080 | IMMORTALITY 081 | PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN 082 | APOLLO JUSTICE: ACE ATTORNEY TRILOGY 086 | TEKKEN 8 088 | JURASSIC PARK CLASSIC GAMES COLLECTION 092 | POTION CRAFT 093 | WARFRAME: WHISPERS IN THE WALLS [ONLINE] 094

Like A Dragon: Infinite Wealth

A Hawaii 5-0-hour adventure

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £59.99
ETA Out now
PUB Sega
DEV Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 65+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Colour vision assistance; customisable auto-battle, and subtitles; adjustable camera speed, and blood level; battle speed slowdown; optional action prompts; swap left and right stick

Kazuma Kiryu, the Dragon Of Dojima, yakuza with a heart of gold, is back. Living in the shadows and presumed dead lest his adopted family come to harm, he's tying up loose ends as he battles a late-stage cancer diagnosis. As fists fly in many desperate scraps, my Kiryu does so in a rootin' tootin' cowboy outfit, able to jump on top of a wild bull to send legions of goons ragdolling.

As ever, then, Like A Dragon (formerly titled Yakuza) switches between guffaw-worthy humour and dire emotional turmoil as easily as your party members change jobs. Half-set in Hawaii (Kiryu and the last game's new starter Kasuga are dual protagonists and you bounce between their escapades), the sunny vibes do a lot to freshen up the series, including adding a bevy of 'tourist'-inspired jobs to the career-oriented class system, such as Kiryu's aforementioned Desperado outfit (complete with gunslinging, tossing dynamite, lassoing, and more shenanigans besides).

It's a good thing too, as were it not for the sunny clime of the American state, much of Infinite Wealth's retreading of the previous game's story beats would feel a bit exhausting. As only the second game in a sort of soft reboot that rethought the series as a turn-based RPG rather than a brawler (otherwise, this is the eighth mainline entry), the fact Kasuga's journey is so tied to what came before is disappointing, and intimidating for new players. Infinite though this wealth of combat may be, we'd still like a bit more new money.

FRESH START

But legs akimbo on top of that bull, ready to plough into enemies, you might be wondering how we got ourselves into this situation. When we reunite with Kasuga here, the yakuza's 'great dissolution' that fuelled most of the last game's conflict,

Talk about serving up a beating.

> Switches between guffaw-worthy humour and dire emotional turmoil as easily as your party members change jobs.

Bonds
BINGO +25
不二宮千歳
CHITOSE FUJINOMIYA
Chi-chan says coconut oil's great for your skin.
Supposedly, it keeps old geezers like me looking sharp, too.

Chat with your party around town to unlock new combo moves and job options, though the fantastic banter is often just as much its own reward.

1

2

3 4

1 Selfie moment! Kasuga's eternal optimism shines through several of LAD's mechanics, including fun selfie moments. 2 Reposition to the right place and you can turn your battle arena onto your opponents. 3 V-Tuber Tatara Hisoka is crucial to the game's callout culture themes. What good is the truth to online haters? 4 Yamai's gangly, snake-like attacks make him an instantly iconic antagonist.

intended to end the crime syndicates, hasn't gone to plan. Now part of HelloWork, Kasuga spends most of his time helping former yakuza to find work despite the tide of legislative red tape that hinders the former criminals in finding employment, housing, or even phone contracts. If someone wants to make amends, Kasuga helps them find work that suits them, often harnessing their criminal skillset (like security consulting).

The rest of the last game's party have also moved on and found steady positions. But when Kasuga's crush on former squad member Saeko takes a turn for the awkward, it's only the start of his worries; he's then miscast as colluding with former yakuza to commit crimes by a callout V-Tuber, Tatara. His life, and those of his associates, falls to pieces. That is, until the local Seiryu yakuza reveal to him a plan to finalise the dissolution project, and let slip that the mother he thought was dead is alive, and in Hawaii. However, when Kasuga flies out to meet her, he discovers she's gone missing, and Kiryu, as part of his secret-agent-like activities for the Daidoji, is also tasked with trying to hunt her down.

The setup is a darn sight messier and slower than the previous game's, which opened with murder and intrigue and sucked us into Kasuga's life as a young man. Here, it's a lot of running around and playing catch-up with characters. While it pays off eventually, it's hours until the Hawaii plot gets going, and hours more until you can, say, play around with jobs.

It's worth it, though, as the strong character work and theming deliver far more than the actual plot's core beats (which are full of predictable twists and scenes you feel like you've seen in previous Yakuza games). The influence of online callout culture is well realised, and makes Infinite Wealth feel like a truly modern entry in the series. It pairs well with the many characters' struggle for atonement – after all, if the deck is stacked to enable everyone to think the worst of you, how can you succeed? As Kiryu seeks atonement for the yakuza's past misdeeds and Kasuga looks ahead to the future, it's a neat two-pronged approach.

Few gaming moments feel as good as delivering UI chaos in a RPG as you devastate a group of enemies with a well-planned area-clearing hit.

> The influence of online callout culture is well realised here.

ISLAND CALLING

There's some shuffling between locations, but for the most part Kasuga leads a party in Honolulu, Hawaii, while Kiryu does the same in Japan (across returning maps Yokohama and Kamurucho). Hawaii is an incredible setting for the series, colourful, and great to explore. A rudimentary friend system means Kasuga can wave, throw a shaka, or give snacks to certain residents to fill a friendship meter, a small touch that makes Honolulu feel truly alive. It's filled with a huge number of people walking through its shopping centres and on the beach (with some occasional slowdown to match, though it's minor).

It's also a fantastic excuse to party up with some fresh faces, who all take the group dynamic in new directions. These include Eric Tomizawa, a world-weary cabbie with underworld connections and a mean right hook with his wrench, and Chitose Fujinomiya, a transfer student and dancer who's young enough to be able to explain things like online videos and monetisation to the comparatively older cast (at one point, she has to reveal that 50,000 video views would only make a pittance to the otherwise starry-eyed squad). Antagonists shine too, though it's Yutaka Yamai, a former yakuza who left Japan to found a Hawaiian crime family, who outshines his celebrity cast rivals – perpetually cold despite the climate and sporting a big coat, he desperately seeks out dust-ups to get his blood flowing.

Sub-stories play into the setting smartly, and, as ever, marry the bonkers with the heartfelt. From helping a popular ukulele star rekindle his love of 'potato rock' to assisting a Japanese sightseer to find true love while navigating tourist scams, they ooze charm. Returning characters fit right in. Did you ever expect to be holding back tears as a grown man dressed as a baby waves his nappy in the air? You will. This is the kind of game where the side-content isn't just expansive, it's of a high enough quality that you'll want to see it all. That's before we even get into a bevy of arcade games; the Sujimon League (where you battle using enemies you befriend in order to take on the 'Discreet Four'); and the ridiculously in-depth Dondoko Island, a riff on Animal Crossing where you build a dream resort with cute furniture such as... a yakuza finger-cutting set – that could almost use a whole review of its own.

Dwight, leader of Hawaii's Barracudas faction, is portrayed by Danny Trejo (and uses machetes).

SUN-DER DOME

Hawaii isn't all good vibes, though. Kasuga encounters difficulty thanks to his rusty English, and finds out much of the police force are aggressively racist to a foreigner whose passport and clothes have been stolen (the coco variety aren't the only nuts to be seen on Honolulu beach). It's refreshing to see critical depictions of how corruption within law enforcement and government regimes can help crime to flourish. Perhaps the non-Japanese setting enables this, though the same is brought to bear in Japan too... for the most part. Infinite Wealth still struggles with where to land on some of this in the case of the series' home country, especially in regards to its depiction of the police compared to Hawaii's. Though we will always be happy to see the return of Makoto Date (voiced once again by longtime Goofy star Bill Farmer, reprising his role from the PS2 original).

The sheer density of pedestrians is also reflected in the random encounters looking for a tussle. The last game's switch to turn-based combat wasn't without some teething issues, and fortunately almost all of those have been addressed here. In a recent interview we spoke to producer Hiroyuki Sakamoto, who told us the developers were looking to greatly reduce the amount of luck in fights, aiming to make things more strategic. (If you're reading this, Sakamoto, then great work: you pulled it off.)

Everything that's changed is geared around giving you more control over how a throwdown plays out. Being able to reposition each party member alone manifests in loads of additional options, from lining up attacks with a variety of areas of effect (circles, cones, thick lines, the works) to sending foes flying in a perfect arc to bowl their mates over or into the waiting spatula of your chef-class ally, or even readying up a combo strike with a friend. Buffs, debuffs, and status ailments feel

1 Grapple attacks don't just dish out high damage, but break pesky enemy guards as well. 2 Go on the warpath as Kiryu and cut-ins of enemy faces breaking harken back to the good old days. 3 Outnumbered? Canny use of ailments, especially paralysis, can turn the tide (remember this for the final boss, we promise it'll help).

more fluid as well, often resulting from specific gear or as secondary effects of skills, and there are even moves that play off having those things applied (like dealing extra damage to someone already bleeding). Enemies can guard as well, though using a grapple attack will knock them out of it, and positioning for a back attack allows you to ignore it – and always deals extra damage.

Some timing elements also return, like critical hits heaping damage on downed enemies if you get the command out before they stand back up. Similarly, if you act quickly when a group stands together like bowling pins, you might be able to get a strike before they drift apart. Kiryu, on the other hand, can say to hell with the whole thing, spending his special meter to smash the RPG UI to pieces and temporarily go ham with a stripped-back take on his own games' brawling.

It's not completely without issue. While you can now skip through scuffles with much weaker enemies with L2, some fights still drag (especially when an enemy is able to call in reinforcements or dish out their own heals). In some areas characters can get confused about where to stand, sometimes repositioning after your command to scupper the combo you thought you had. You'll also see an instant Game Over if your party leader (Kasuga or Kiryu) is knocked out, which feels woefully old-school. Otherwise, consider us hugely impressed with the smart approach to upgrading battles. The fusion of real-time elements and turn-based commands makes this one of our favourite RPG battle systems ever.

With real-time elements, this is easily one of our favourite turn-based battle systems ever.

DUMPSTER DIVING

While the combat shines, some of the systems around it are still slightly wonky, mostly thanks to an in-game economy that's both obtuse and requires a lot of legwork. Almost everything costs money, and plenty of it, influencing your decisions whether to buy high-end gear or use Pound Mates (think Final Fantasy summons but with, for example, a sword-obsessed otaku rather than your boy Ifrit). Beyond that, basic weapons, even high-level ones, can be a bit boring until you use them to craft their upgraded version, which often adds an elemental affinity or status ailment activation chance. Except these cost even *more* money, plus a combination of special crystals and rare drops. Tracking these down can be a headache – who exactly drops empty cough drop tins? Crystals can be tracked down with time-limited Sujimon raids at least, but the tier of the crystal rewards (of which there are three: fragments, geodes, and full crystals) can often feel behind the curve for where you're at in the story. You can at least fuse them together to create higher-tier versions, but in Honolulu this requires swimming out to a guy on a raft and then all the way back (as you can't fast travel while at sea). Getting random pickups from rubbish bins and street corners will only get you so far.

Some of these are more readily available in the Labyrinths – randomly arranged dungeon floors – but completing

4 Kasuga's first quest: getting date-ready. 5 When Kiryu and killer chef Nanba have you in their sights, you've yee'd your last haw. 6 Small QTEs power up your skills, making your punches pack, well, *more* of a punch.

these can feel like even more of a slog. While the last game's colosseum was a bit of a drag, adding running through hallways to the mix isn't a great solution.

It can feel like an exhausting power curve to engage with for a series that, while it did have a skill tree, didn't require much of a grind until it went turn-based. The game flags level and gear recommendations to you before tricky sequences, but early on it can feel like a struggle to match. We worried we were putting too much stock in getting the good stuff, but tough end-game battles set us straight, and we still ended up picking a fight at a lower level than the final boss. Thanks to its real-world crime story, Like A Dragon feels like the kind of RPG you should be able to recommend to newcomers to the genre or even games as a whole, but this obtuseness and lack of difficulty modes sadly makes it a far from straightforward recommendation.

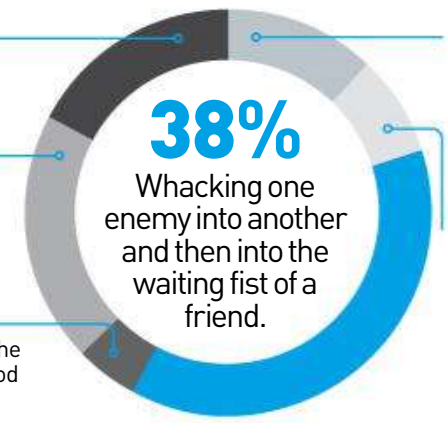
By the end, though, the feeling of mastery as we punch our way through our problems across not one but two climaxes is satisfying. However, the emotional beats don't hit quite as hard, thanks to how close they are to what the series has offered in the past. There's a big handoff to Kasuga to carry the series into the future, but we've done that already. There was too much of that in the last game rather than letting Kasuga shine, and even more of it here. It's a great send-off for series fans, but how many times are we going to throw champagne at this ship before we let Kasuga truly sail off into the future?

Fantastic characters, impeccable combat, and a fresh setting lift up a game that can otherwise feel stuck in the past. We're beyond ready for more Kasuga. Oscar Taylor-Kent

8 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: LAD: IW



17% Enjoying the banter that occurs as you wander around.

20% Watching a seemingly infinite number of long cutscenes.

5% Mastering minigames, like the Crazy Taxi-like food delivery service.

12% Bashing away junk on Dondoko Island. Wait... there's a whole other game here?

8% Hoovering up briefcases, rocks, and loose change as we sprint around.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

SEONHEE
A powerful crime boss and master assassin and, this time, willing to join the party.

BRYCE FAIRCHILD
Leader of Palekana, where Kasuga's mum helps out with charity. Does he have a lead?

EIJI MITAMURA
A tech whizz who helps Kasuga out of a jam, he's able to find info on the dark web.

LOVING/HATING

CULTURE COMBO
As it's relatively close to Japan, Hawaii has a large population of Japanese immigrants, giving LAD a unique perspective.

HELPING HAND
Support characters are teased in battles early on, but it ends up being a feature that hardly shows up at all – a missed opportunity.

STATPACK

10
Party members, though you'll never be juggling more than five given the ping-ponging between Hawaii and Japan. Friends forever!

90
Memories for Kiryu to recall throughout Kamurocho and Yokohama, including some real deep cuts. The Dragon Of Dojima has led a full life.

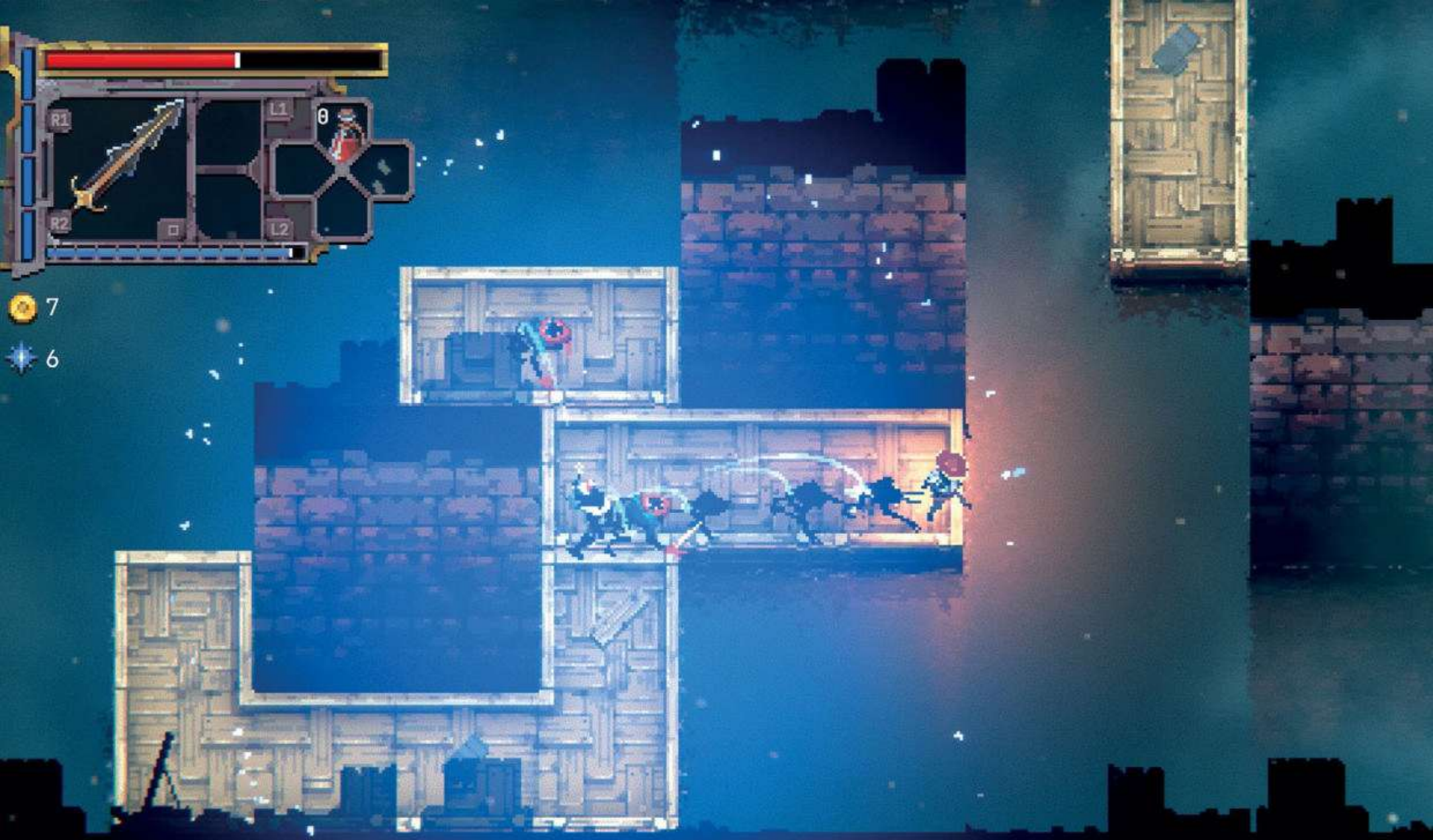
317
Sujimon, Kasuga's RPGified visions of miscreants, to fight. 135 of them can be recruited for your own Sujimon battles – catch 'em all.

IS IT BETTER THAN?

LAD Gaiden – covering Kiryu's recent history – is too slight to match up to Kasuga's massive package.

The 1980s-set Yakuza 0 remains the dual-protagonist holy grail, and is a non-stop thrillride.

Improved battles just edge out Yakuza: LAD, though we have to admit Kasuga's first story is stronger.



The sound design's a little odd. Did so many enemies have to sound like monkeys?

Loot River

More like Loot Riv-meh

Souls meets Tetris," cried the press release for this one. Uh-oh. That's the kind of desperate elevator pitch that makes CEOs start taking the stairs. So we're pleased to report that Loot River's central idea is actually pretty good.

The game's combat is certainly brutal enough to earn a bloody thumbs up from the soulslike crowd. It's all about dodging, timing your sword slices, and debating whether you're going to bother learning how to parry or bluff your way through yet another soulslike without using the parry. It's all well-implemented, but given the popularity of soulslikes of late, it's also all more overfamiliar than your own reflection. The genuinely interesting stuff is happening beneath your feet.

This is where the reference to the classic block-stacker comes in. You're crawling through dungeons made up of Tetromino-shaped chunks of floor, which you can move around. But it doesn't play like Tetris. It's more like you're fighting on top of a sliding block puzzle, and it turns out sticking a soulslike on top was exactly what these once-tedious tile shufflers needed. You move your character with the left stick while simultaneously moving the floor tiles with the right. Sometimes you're just trying to slot yourself a new route, but where it gets clever is when you start using it to flee fights, or to plan out how you're going to take out a screen full of grunts.

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £19.99
ETA Out now
PUB Straka Studio
DEV Straka Studio
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 15 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Larger font size; colourblind mode; UI background; easy mode

It's fun feeling yourself mastering the timing of the challenging combat *and* the optimum way to shift the floor to give yourself the best chance of success in encounters. Some clever boss fights manipulate the floor in fun ways too. One keeps slamming you into tiles covered in horrible explosive minions. Another has a pack of vicious hounds in constant pursuit, forcing you to rearrange the floor under pressure. And it's not just the bosses who switch things up; some standard enemies freeze the tiles in place (we forget the official name for these ones in the bestiary, so let's go with *utter bastards*). The opening area, which you'll get to know *very* well, rewards you if you manage to clear it in under two minutes. Naturally this encourages speedy tile-slamming gameplay that's joyfully chaotic.

UP LOOT CREEK

Nice idea, but it's doing a lot of heavy lifting for a randomly generated roguelike that gets repetitive fast. Other roguelikes disguise repetition better with fun weapon unlocks or ways of making each run feel fresh. But Loot River is a lot stingier than the first half of its name would suggest. It's *ages* before it hands over even its most meagre toys, and few of them are interesting to engage with. The promise of getting to start all over again with a slightly different sword

> **The kind of desperate elevator pitch that makes CEOs start taking the stairs.**

1 Tiles can catch fire, which hurts enemies. Oh, but it also damages you. Run! **2** This not-at-all-creepy skull/head thing heals you. Thanks, skull! **3** This friendly guy wants to introduce us to his outsized hammer. How nice of him.

rarely excites us, no matter what the game, and all too often here it feels like luck is deciding if you're going to win this one. If the best stuff doesn't drop, you know you're in for another tedious run, and that's not something that entices us to try.

We won't spoil the story because that would require us to remember any of it. We like some of the oddball NPCs you gradually fill Firelink Shri… er, the main hub with, but the lack of a memorable narrative is emblematic of Loot River's problems. There's not enough here that stays with you to prevent each run blurring into the next. Still, though no other idea is as good as that floor-shifting one, there are some bright spots, such as the way you start a run with four health potions and can decide how many to take with you. Any potions you leave behind will be doubled upon completion of a level. Risk fighting through the opening level with no potions and you could end up with eight to help you out in the more dangerous second area. It's a brilliant risk-reward mechanic that has us cursing our socialised medicine-snubbing cockiness countless times.

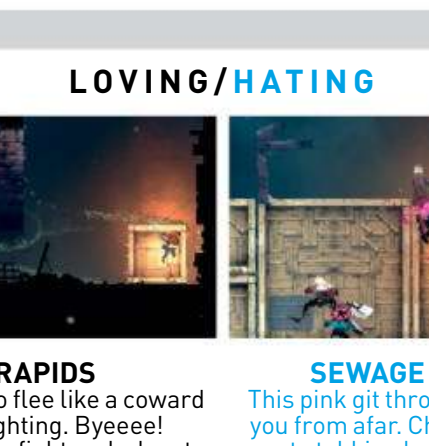
Ideas like that show there's huge potential here. Loot River is a good game clearly made by smart developers, just one lacking the ambition to be something truly special. Still, here's hoping for a sequel (Two-ot River? Hmmm, maybe not) that will expand on its best bits and give us a game that truly floors us.

The central hook almost carries this dungeon crawler, but it struggles to stand out in a crowded field. There's loot to be found here, but more like a puddle's worth. **Abbie Stone**

6 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: LOOT RIVER



6% Inventing new swearwords trying to get floor tiles to fit together.

20% Giggling with glee as you fly through levels, barely stopping.

10% Cheering as a successful run blossoms. Huzzah!

29% Exploring exciting new leve… oh, wait you're in the Sunken Village again. Sigh.

5% Considering suicide in the hopes of rolling more interesting weapons next time around.

HOW TO… UNLOCK THE BEST LOOT FAST

Buy the Flayer Of Memories as soon as you can. A fully charged attack from that will make enemies drop knowledge (aka souls) which you can use to buy more loot unlocks. Manage to roll this in the opening area and you'll be rich in knowledge in no time. *Rich*, we tells ya!

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

SOAP
Offers to double your potions. Has big PS5-I-swiped-from-a-van-for-sale energy.

FINNEGAN
A bard who always speaks in rhyme; talking to him is usually a good time.

CHICKEN
Wait, we can *pet* the chickens in this? We've changed our mind, 10/10.

LOVING/HATING

THE RAPIDS
Using the tiles to flee like a coward instead of fighting. Byeeee! Knowing when to fight and when to flee is essential.

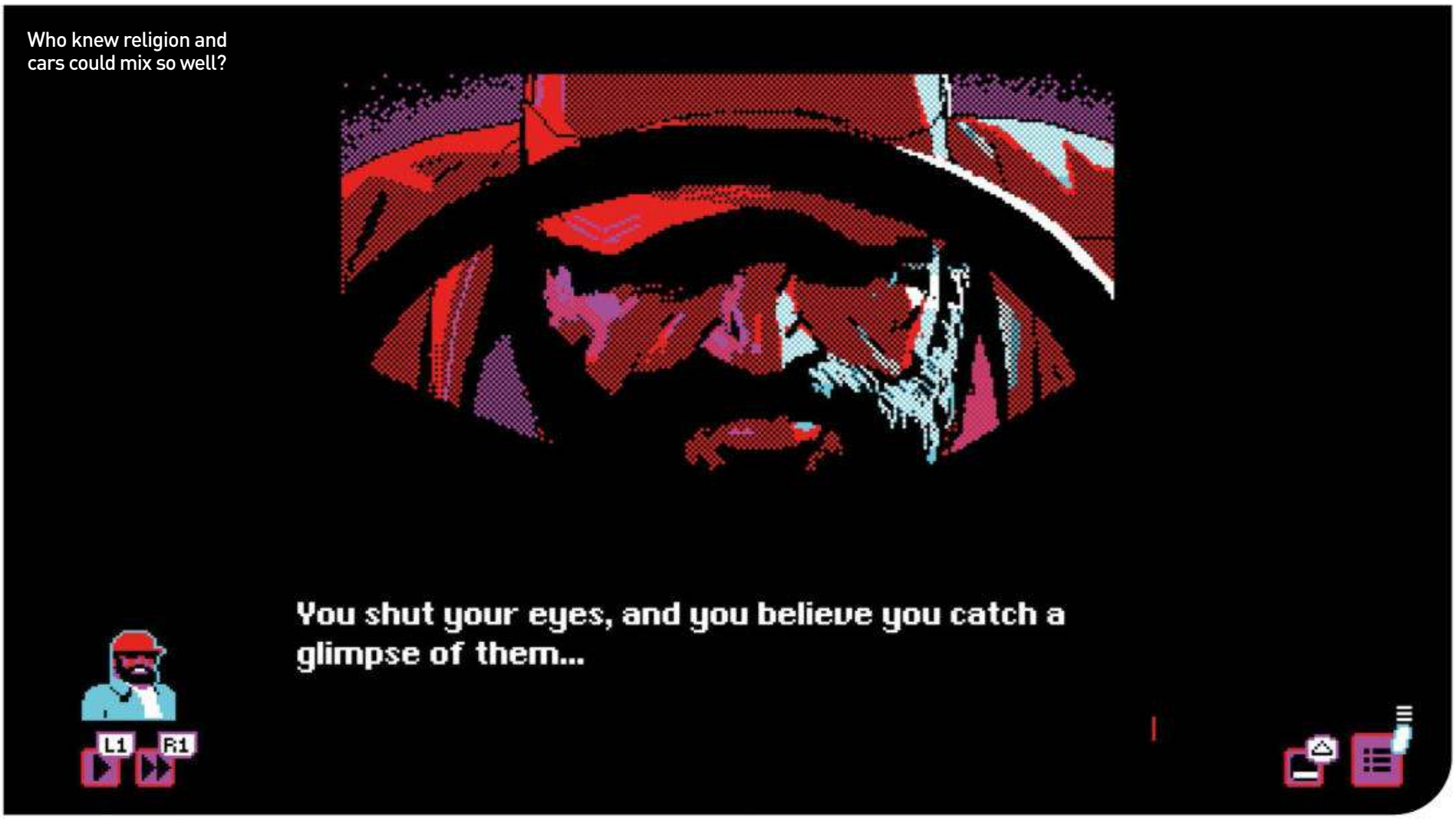
SEWAGE DUMPER
This pink git throws explosives at you from afar. Chase it down and get stabbing before it takes off half your health.

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Fund Finnegan's musical education. Nice to waste money supporting the arts!

SILVER
Get at least three platforms burning simultaneously and you'll earn this.

GOLD
Shatter the relic and win the game! Ah, but it's not that simple. There's more to see…



Bahnsen Knights

Highway to hell

INFO

FORMAT PS5, PS4
PRICE £17.99
ETA Out now
PUB Chorus Worldwide
DEV LCB Game Studio
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 2 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Mandatory subtitles; multiple languages supported; adjustable message speed; sliders for music, sound effects, and master volume

Bahnsen Knights is the third entry in the Pixel Pulps series, following Mothmen 1966 and Varney Lake. This time LCB Game Studio has swapped cryptids and summer camps for a plot that wouldn't feel amiss in Mad Max. Retaining that signature '80s-style pixel art, it's a strange, self-contained tale featuring petrolhead cultists led by a former car salesman, plus some unusual storms.

It's 1980s America, and you're an undercover agent called 'Boulder' who's infiltrated the titular cult to investigate your friend's disappearance. The lingering yet inviting sense of dread immediately draws us in. It's not horror in the traditional sense, but the uneasy suspense is handled well.

One slip is all it'll take to give away your identity, making the stakes feel suitably high for such a short adventure. Boulder's a family-driven man and while we won't spoil any specifics, the emotional aspect of his undercover persona ties into this story well. The best lies contain an element of truth, after all. His position is precarious, as he's gained the attention of Toni, Bahnsen Knights' enigmatic leader. Between the red crosses and not-so-friendly 'baptisms', LCB Game Studio wastes no time playing into Bahnsen Knights' religious undertones.

TO THE AUTOBAHN

This short story is best described as a a decision-driven visual novel, but there are still enjoyable elements of interactivity – such as playing solitaire. Certain tasks require making a binary choice, like pressing the input to turn left or right on the motorway to avoid traffic. Simple enough but rather unexciting. On the other hand, moments that are snappier, like throwing darts as the cursor quickly moves across the board, or picking a lock, often become rather frustrating.

don't worry about making the 'wrong' choice. You may have to play through multiple times to see everything in Bahnsen Knights but it's generous with checkpoints, letting you make mistakes without any lasting consequences. You're even rewarded with a trophy for some reckless decisions.

> Bahnsen Knights' lingering yet inviting sense of dread immediately draws us in.

Despite the limited interactivity, we do feel like our decisions influence the wider narrative. Continuously drinking at the bar makes Boulder more likely to blow his cover, while you can decide how far you'd like to push gathering evidence. Watching the investigation unfold is compelling, though

We're also quite sold on the art style, which is influenced by older PC games. The detailed pixel art is rich in reds and black, helping to build up the tension. Mixed with an often subtle but suitably atmospheric soundtrack, there's a palpable sense of danger. You'll be tempted to replay, for certain.

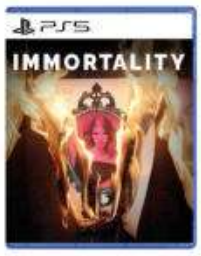
Offers a solid throwback to '80s PC gaming, and while the minigames don't always land, the fantastic story will keep you invested until the end. **Henry Stockdale**

8 PLAY

The production design valiantly attempts to emulate the look and feel of multiple decades – with mixed results.

Immortality

The game of the movie



INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £16.75
ETA Out now
PUB Sam Barlow, Half Mermaid
DEV Half Mermaid Productions
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 3-5 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Detailed content warning available from start menu; subtitles (appearance depends on the era represented, and cannot be adjusted); dates in either UK or US format

Fittingly for a studio named Half Mermaid, this game is something of an impossible creature torn between two worlds. It begins by asking an irresistible question: what happened to Marissa Marcel, an actress who made three films that were never released, then disappeared? As setups go, it's unbeatable.

You answer this question by diving into reels of unreleased footage, featuring a bit of everything from rehearsals to late-night talk show interviews. If you're familiar with Sam Barlow's earlier work, you'll be right at home playing database detective here. However, rather than typing in keywords to find clips, you click on points of interest within the *mostly* period-appropriate mise en scene (don't get us started on the wigs). For instance, clicking on a rose Marissa's holding will take you to another clip in which something similar appears. Pitched as making your own match cuts, it's nowhere near as exacting in practice; some jumps do offer intriguing echoes across Marcel's three films, but in practice your journey feels much more haphazard.

This freer association mechanic – in addition to the anarchic sexuality of Marcel's first film, a monksploitation flick called Ambrosio – gets us hooked early on, but it also means much can be left unsaid by the time you reach the big finish.

DIE TONIGHT, LIVE FOREVER

Once credits roll, it's possible to have missed entire layers of the mystery surrounding Marissa Marcel. As you scrub through clips, your DualSense may vibrate and a ghostly image overlay the scene. You can get a better look at what lies beneath by tilting the left analogue stick to rewind slowly, though the fact you can do this isn't well signposted and finding the right speed can be quite fiddly. It's entirely possible to take these ghosts at face value, assuming they're simply there to create creepy vibes – a mistake as these hauntings turn out to be pivotal to this ghost story.

Though not every clip is sequestering spooks, to get the fullest picture you will need to watch everything. Considering that includes many minutes of table reads (when actors read through a script together) and long single shots, this presents a pacing issue for a story told through an interactive medium.

Immortality is a project that loves film, and exists uncomfortably within the skin of a game. It's constantly threatening to become its truest self, but rather than tear off its flesh and let the screaming skeleton run into the ocean, its biggest swings are too interesting to let dissipate into sea foam. Boasting a compelling mystery plus fantastic lead performances from both Manon Gage and Charlotta Mohlin, we're ultimately glad that such an impossible thing exists.

> **This is a project that loves film, and exists uncomfortably within the skin of a game.**

We could say more, but this is best seen for yourself. Excellent performances and *mostly* solid period-pastiche production design make this hard to look away from. **Jess Kinghorn**

7 PLAY

Prince Of Persia: The Lost Crown

Get ready for a lot of jumping for joy

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £44.99
ETA Out now
PUB Ubisoft
DEV Ubisoft Montpellier
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 20+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Aim assist; disable screen shake; high-contrast mode; melee assist; platforming assist; alt font; scalable HUD

Pity poor Sargon. He's one of the Immortals, a sadly-not-literal name for a gang of Persia's greatest warriors. But now the Prince Of Persia has been kidnapped and so Sargon must go on an epic quest to uncover what happened to that Sands Of Time remake. Er, we mean, to save the Prince.

That's the least of Sargon's problems. When his game was revealed, the response was so vitriolic you'd think Ubisoft had announced a new variant of Covid. The internet quickly condemned this return to the Prince's 2D roots and its controversial new art style. Well, frankly, if you don't like this game's looks, you don't deserve to have eyes. It's *gorgeous*. Colourful, full of life, and clearly the work of the team behind the also-brilliant Rayman Legends. There are boss fights here so visually spectacular they wouldn't look out of place in a Spiderverse movie.

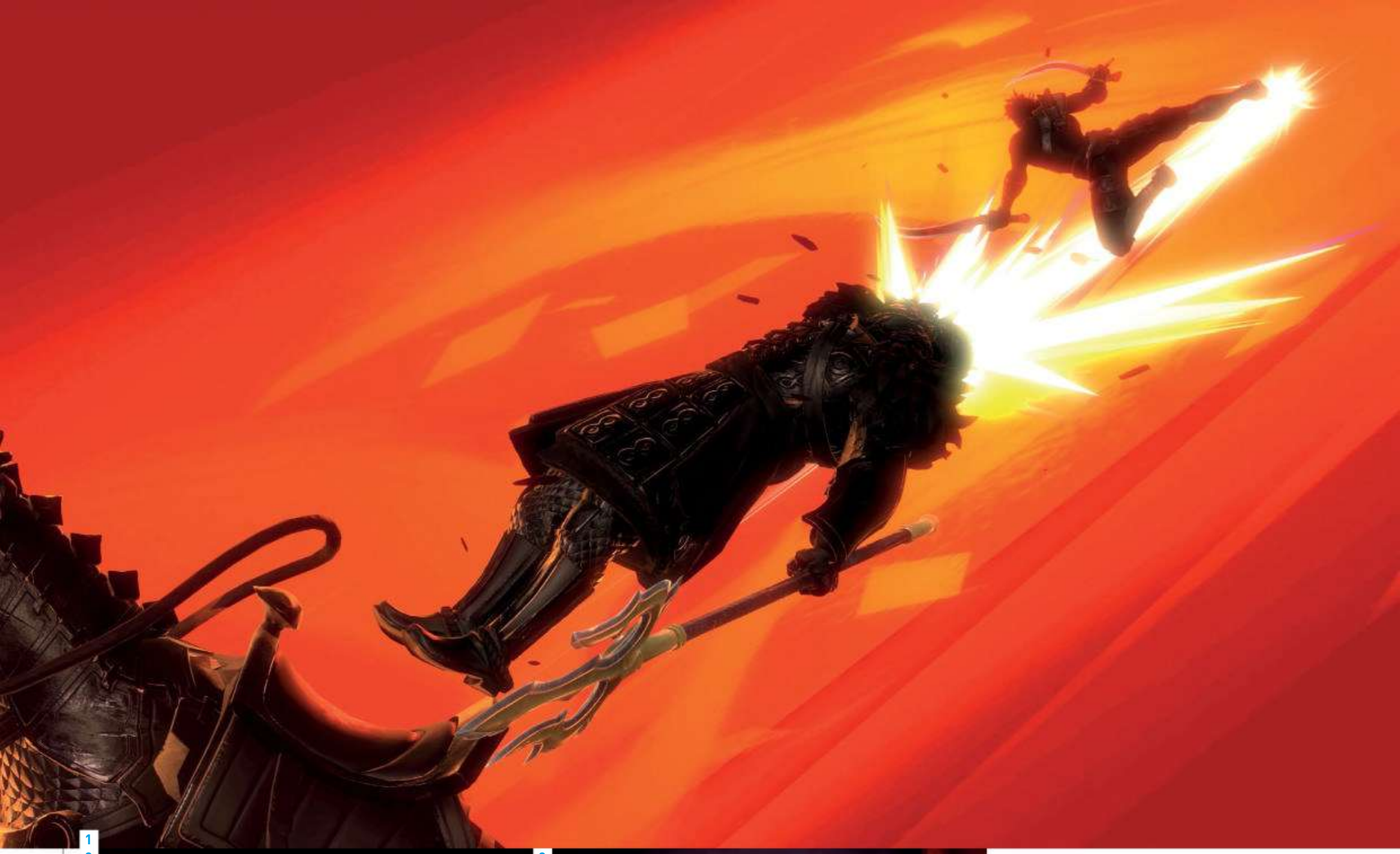
You're searching for the Prince on Mount Qaf, which is experiencing something of a timey-wimey nervous breakdown. Here we meet children wise beyond their years, soldiers from bygone eras, and versions of ourselves who are less than pleased to see us. It's a terrific premise for a metroidvania, developed by a team who've clearly played a lot of them. Hollow Knight's lovely air dash and power-giving talismans are here, as is Guacamelee!'s ingenious use of combat powers that also enhance the platforming (and vice versa). A greatest hits package then? Nope, because we think the fighting here bests them both.

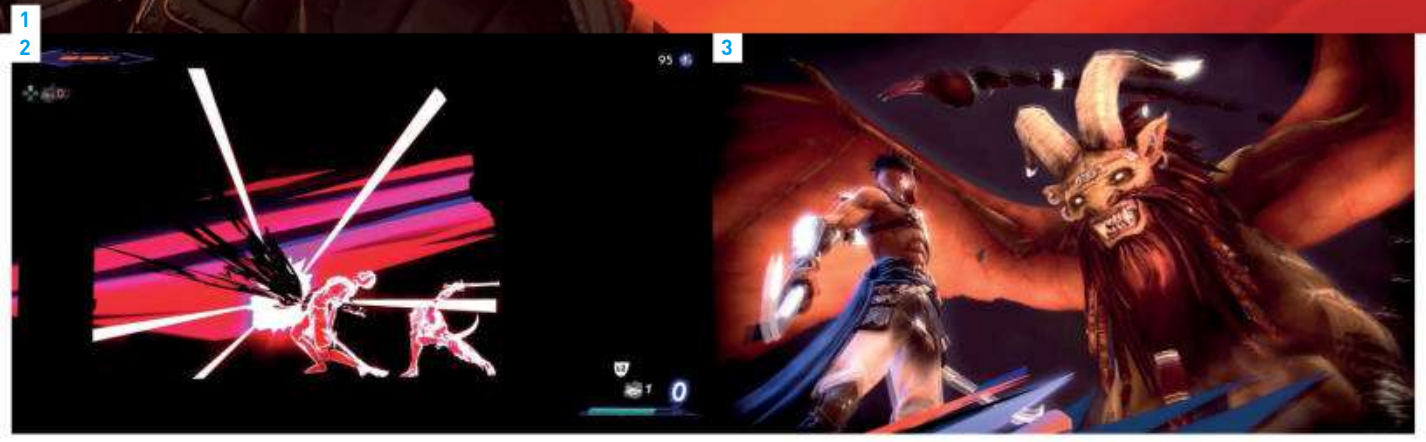
SWING AND A HIT

Combat in previous Prince Of Persias has been about as much fun as fixing a broken toilet. With

He may not be a prince, but Sargon's got what it takes to keep us happy.

"One of the best combat systems we've ever enjoyed in two dimensions."





1 Stills don't capture how slick this game looks in motion. Go and download the demo from the PlayStation store! 2 Nail the timing of a counterattack and you're rewarded with some of the most spectacular visuals in any game. Isn't that burst of impact rays exciting, even in a screenshot? 3 Boss fights are the combat at its absolute best. We tried one on Immortal difficulty and are still in therapy as a result.

your tongue. Ubisoft has slightly overcompensated here with one of the best combat systems we've ever enjoyed in two dimensions. Initially, it's all about parrying and dodging. Pedestrian stuff, helped by how great it feels. Sargon is a delight to control, tight and responsive, almost absurdly agile. The sound of a perfectly-timed parry is so note-perfect the audio team must have got it by recording themselves successfully parrying God.

Then you unlock a bow and arrow. Big whoop. Bows and arrows in videogames have been around since about 600 BCE. But then you realise you can throw the bow and it behaves like a shuriken boomerang. And when your bow-merang comes back, you can parry it, sending it back into the fray to hit your enemies again. The combat is constantly doing this – revealing extra layers the more time you spend with it. Eventually you'll learn how to use one power (too good to spoil) to win fights by basically teaming up with yourself. You can use an equippable amulet to create a bubble of slowed-down time upon a successful parry and now you're playing a 2D Bayonetta (it's called Viewtiful Joe and *why won't Capcom bloody rerelease it?*). Another introduces a vicious backstab to your dodge if your timing is sharp enough. Constantly curating your build by swapping out amulets keeps the fighting feeling fresh, as do unlockable Athra Surges, special moves charged up with successful attacks and parries. A few of the late-game surges feel like smacking someone in the face with a Dragon Ball Z series finale. This combat system is a more forgiving Sekiro (well, on normal difficulty) but just as much fun to master, all with PlatinumGames' OTT eye for spectacle. Sublime.

You'll pull off feats that are basically flying with your legs. Your grey matter gets a workout too.

LEAPS AHEAD

None of this would matter if the parkour wasn't any good. It isn't. It's perfect. The genius of every unlockable traversal power is that it briefly feels like it's going to break the game, when actually it's just introduced a fresh wave of challenge. But because so many of these powers make the combat more fun, you never feel like you're just unlocking a raising of the difficulty. We roll our eyes when we get the double jump; easily the game's dullest, most predictable power. The Lost Crown notices our rude gesture and slaps us across the face with some *evil* platforming. That double jump only resets when Sargon's feet touch the ground or a wall, and soon the ground takes one hell of a long lunch break. You'll be sliding down walls, air-dashing past spikes, double jumping onto breaking platforms then hurrying off them just in time to face screen after screen of the nastiest traps Mount Qaf can throw at you, praying for safe ground.

Towards the end this mix of mental and physical gymnastics becomes muscle memory. You'll pull off feats that are basically flying with your legs. Your grey matter gets just as solid a workout as Sargon's pins, too. Puzzles that have to be solved with essentially two time trial ghosts of yourself are so smart that we're still applauding.

4 A pirate ship battle frozen in time. A visual metaphor for Skull & Bones' development. **5** You'll meet this old oddball at Sargon's lowest point. **6** Some truly hideous creatures lurk in the depths. Like this ghastly *thing*.

That level of mastery is needed to find all the game's secrets. The Lost Crown is *packed* with secrets and you're given the perfect tool for finding them. Come across an obstacle you can't yet surpass and Sargon can place a 'Memory Shard'. It's a screenshot that lives on the map screen, reviewable at any time, so when you have the tools you need you can instantly remind yourself where you need to go. It's the mechanic these games have been crying out for since Super Metroid and immediately cuts down 99% of the genre's frustrations.

TIMELESS TALE

Much like the rest of the game, the save-the-prince story starts deceptively simply and gradually reveals itself to be the best in the series since – yes! – Sands Of Time. Sargon can't match that game's pompous prince for personality but he doesn't need to. He's surrounded by a charismatic cast in a tale that effortlessly jumps between the heartbreaking and hilarious, sometimes in the same wonderfully-written sentence. It's a tragedy at heart, but told with a winning smile – there's none of the emo-angst of Warrior Within here – and often genuinely moving. It took 19 years but this series has finally once again nailed Sands Of Time's storybook adventure vibe that's such a constant joy to spend time in. A Prince Of Persia that doesn't star the Prince Of Persia could have been an absolute disaster. But this could never have starred a prince. It's a metroidvania fit only for a king.

A comeback story for the ages. Beautiful, with awesome combat and perfect parkour. Hollow Knight: Silksong may have to cure cancer to top this. **Abbie Stone**

9
PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: POP: TLC

12% Agonising over which power-granting amulet to choose. Arghhh!

16% Trying to beat a boss while gasping at the bout's beautiful art direction.

10% Laughing/ crying at the strong writing.

25% Mastering the timing on the parry. On Immortals difficulty, make this 99%...

5% Rubbing your awestruck eyes at the cutscenes. You'll never wash your peepers again.

HOW TO... GET YOUR HEALTH BACK

An amulet that restores some of your health whenever you make a successful parry is a huge help, but it's the Bahman's Breath Athra Surge that got this review in on time. It creates both an explosion *and* a pillar of healing light. Just make sure enemies don't shove you out of it.

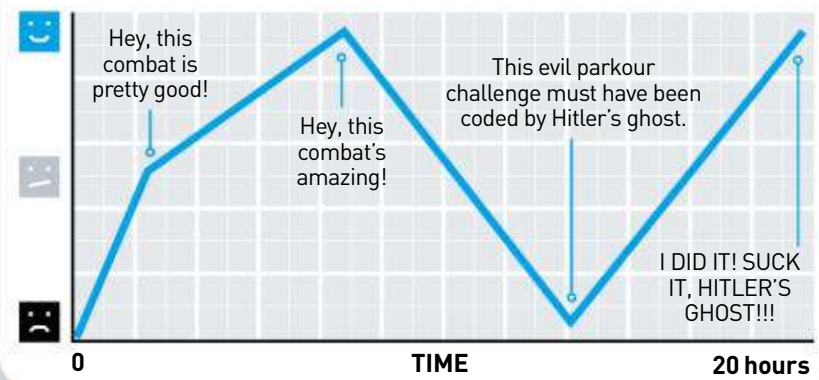
FRIENDS & ENEMIES

FARIBA
A 'little' girl who's clearly been stuck on Mount Qaf for a long, long time.

OROD
The best Immortal. He's cocky, quick to laugh, and fights using two anchors.

PRINCE GHASSAN
Who? Oh – the guy who usually stars in these games. Apologies, your majesty.

COMPEL-O-GRAPH


Hey, this combat is pretty good!
Hey, this combat's amazing!
This evil parkour challenge must have been coded by Hitler's ghost.
I DID IT! SUCK IT, HITLER'S GHOST!!!
0
TIME
20 hours

IS IT BETTER THAN?

YES
The last POP, The Forgotten Sands has some lovely ideas but poor combat and a dull story holds it back.

YES
"You bitch!" yells the Prince in Warrior Within, one of the most hilariously misjudged sequels ever.

YES
The POP PS3 reboot is an interesting idea with a lovely art style, but it's a less successful reimagining.

Pointing finger at the ready: you know what to do!

Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney Trilogy

Wright more wrongs as legal eagle Apollo

Five years after the release of the Phoenix Wright Trilogy, this collection of the (at present) final three games in the Ace Attorney series doesn't just make them available on modern platforms, it encompasses what was, at the time of the original release, a soft reboot for the series. After all, Ace Attorney's creator Shu Takumi considered Wright's story to be finished after the third game.

Enter Apollo Justice, anxious attorney at law, blessed with vocal cords of steel. In his very first case, this rookie lawyer has to defend none other than disgraced former attorney Phoenix Wright, who seems to have changed quite a bit, and not for the better. The first game in the trilogy, Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney, introduces an almost entirely new cast, including Phoenix's daughter Trucy (who works as Apollo's partner during investigations) and prosecutor (and former rockstar) Klavier Gavin.

This may take some getting used to, but the trademark Ace Attorney humour remains intact. As before, the games are divided between investigations, where you look for clues and interview potential witnesses, and a court segment, where you cross-examine witness statements and dramatically shout "Objection" whenever you notice a flaw in a statement. Thanks to the return of Ema Skye, you can try out new forensic investigation methods during each case, including fingerprint analysis and an X-ray – they may not be terribly exciting, but they provide welcome variation from what is otherwise a lot of reading.

INFO

FORMAT PS4
PRICE TBC
ETA Out now
PUB Capcom
DEV Capcom
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 80+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Adjustable textbox opacity and text speed; screen flash toggle; cutscene subtitles; reading-only Story mode; hint system (games 5 and 6 only)

MOODY MECHANICS

The other two games in this collection, Dual Destinies and Spirit Of Justice, combine characters old and new and make further attempts to vary the action, with mixed success. The mood matrix, used by Dual Destinies' protagonist Athena Cykes, for example, enables you to analyse a witness' emotions and find discrepancies. But often several conclusions apply, making finding the right answer feel somewhat random.

Whether you already know and love the games or you're a new fan looking to finish the Ace Attorney series, the Apollo Justice Trilogy has a few fresh features up its rolled-up sleeves. For starters Capcom has remastered these beyond the previous HD versions (which were on mobile), making the visuals much sharper and animations smoother, especially for games five and six, which introduced 3D to the series. Additionally, you have control over text speed, screen flashing, and more, while a full log presents you with both text and your actions. The Animation studio, which lets you put your own scenes together, can be a

1 Apollo isn't really a shining hero – he has to put up with a lot. **2** The banter between Trucy and Apollo is some of the best in the entire series. **3** A lot has changed, but it wouldn't be the same without these exclamations, would it?

bit fiddly to use on console, but it's a lot of fun nonetheless, if only to bask in the wonderfully expressive character designs.

TURNABOUT TRILOGY

If there is something all the games in this collection have in common, it's that the cases are darker and more dramatic than those in the previous trilogy. Things don't get quite as goofy as Wright's earlier adventures, perhaps in an attempt to make it easier for players to get through trials without resorting to guesswork. As with every Ace Attorney game, you can expect a mix of outstanding cases and characters with some heavy-handed ones – much like The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles, the best writing is where it shows evil can be institutional, and that hardly anyone murders because they're simply a villain. We love flamboyant prosecutor Klavier Gavin and his air guitar, and clown lady Geiru Toneido has much more depth than her recent internet stardom might have led you to believe. (What is it with Ace Attorney and clowns?) The prosecutors in Spirit Of Justice, meanwhile, finally show what it's like if a prosecutor is an actual threat, not a friend in disguise.

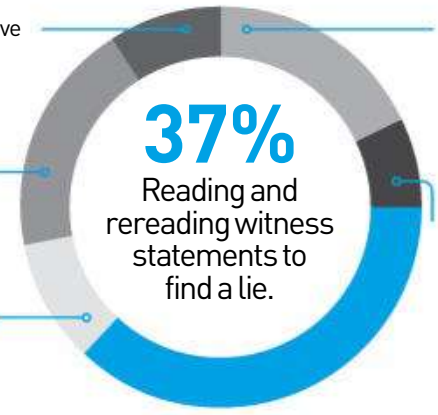
None of the cases or new gameplay systems are without their flaws, and we recommend you start with the Phoenix Wright Trilogy if you want to get into Ace Attorney, but this is a lovingly assembled collection of superb games (and their DLC) with plenty of nice new features to boot. Case closed.

While it doesn't reach the storytelling heights of the Phoenix Wright Trilogy, this is a collection of great remasters with several standout mysteries. **Malindy Hetfeld**

8 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: APOLLO JUSTICE: AAT



9% Missing Detective Gumshoe, the best detective there ever was.

19% Shouting "objection!" along with your defence attorney.

10% Trying out a new gadget that's just what you needed.

18% Trying to decipher the meaning of a witness' localised pun name.

7% Listening to witnesses and/or prosecutors make fun of Apollo's hair.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

GUY ELDOON
Turns to the Wright Anything Agency when his beloved noodle stand goes missing.

SIMON BLACKQUILL
This prosecutor takes the word 'workaholic' to new heights.

TRUCY WRIGHT
Phoenix's 17-year-old daughter is a master magician and an asset to any investigation.

SECOND OPINION PRESIDING JUDGE

It's been about eight years since the last game in this collection was released, which is almost shocking considering how good it is, proving that the long-running series still had plenty of inventive mysteries it could tell. Good defence lawyers shouldn't leave their audience wanting more, but a showman should – and if this is it, what a gavel clobber to go out to. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

LOVING/HATING

ANIMATED PROCEEDINGS
From Dual Destinies onward, the Ace Attorney games feature beautiful animated sequences from renowned studio Bones.

SPIRITS FALLING
We don't *hate* them, but the Divination Séance segments in Spirit Of Justice are unskippable and mostly amount to guesswork.

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Present evidence during your first cross-examination and grab a Bronze.

SILVER
Learn about Trucy's allowance in Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney episode 3 for this.

GOLD
Thoroughly examine Charly the houseplant. It's worth the effort, we promise.

Tekken 8

One Jin & tonic please, we're getting punch drunk tonight

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £64.99
ETA Out now
PUB Bandai Namco
DEV Bandai Namco, Arika
PLAYERS 1-2
LENGTH N/A
ACCESSIBILITY Customisable round number and duration; vibration and cross-platform play on/off; customisable controls; adjustable HUD positions and effect saturation; colourblind options

While Street Fighter and Mortal Kombat came out swinging last year, Tekken stayed in the locker room, polishing its brass knuckles and sharpening its kicking shoes. Now it's finally ready to take on the competition, and it does not disappoint. This is the best entry in the series so far, and is eyeing the coveted title of Best PlayStation Fighter.

Beat-'em-ups can be daunting for newcomers, especially nowadays. There are so many systems and phrases unique to the genre, and seeing devoted fans casually toss out words that make no sense to outsiders doesn't help with that feeling of exclusion. Fortunately Tekken has offered concessions to the more casual player for years, and continues to do so.

First, there's Special Style. With a quick tap of L1 you can turn this simplified play on or off. It essentially allows you to unleash special moves and combos simply by tapping one button at a time. That may sound like it negates skill and cheapens the experience, but that isn't the case. It's a great option for newbies, but it blocks off certain moves and techniques, and each attack is just as vulnerable to blocks and counters as usual. Think of it as a way to ease in new players, or to help veterans get their head around a new character.

TEKKEN YOUR TIME

One thing the genre has always struggled with is tutorials. How do you explain complex systems without boring or frustrating the player? Bandai Namco's solution is Arcade Quest. Lasting just an hour or two, this story mode tells the tale of a group of friends working their way through the local arcades towards a Tekken tournament.

It's not perfect – it would have to be three times as long to go into proper depth – but by gradually

This game's as welcoming to newcomers as one where you repeatedly pummel each other can be.

The Tekken you know and love, packing more of a punch than ever.

1 Tekken 8's rarely subtle, but that's why we love it. You *know* when you've been hit. 2 These bobbleheaded little guys don't fight outside of the Tekken arcade machines. We suppose that's a good thing? 3 The story fights are epic, and yet – as elsewhere in the game – very much bloodless.

introducing techniques via plenty of battles, it's an excellent way to familiarise people with the game, and to give anybody new to Tekken an excellent head start. We also appreciate the fact that the story makes a point of saying that the game is for everybody, not just hardcore players. While the message is delivered in predictably cheesy fashion, it's great that the developers are saying this outright in-game.

If you *are* a devout follower of Tekken, plenty of love and care has gone into making this a game for you too. The main story mode has plenty of cutscenes and phenomenal production values, following regular main character Jin as he tries to stop his father Kazuya from taking over the world. There are much briefer individual stories, too, though you'll need to be particularly deep in the lore to fully appreciate those.

FIGHT RISK

As for the core gameplay, it's the Tekken you know and love but packing more of a punch than ever. The game has become a little faster, without losing any of the trademark sense of weight and impact. Each blow has real digital oomph, and each mistake you make is clear enough to make you wince as your opponent takes the opportunity you've given them to gleefully pummel you.

Matches tend to be faster than in previous Tekkens mostly thanks to the new Heat system, which encourages aggression. At any time, once per round, a character can activate Heat. This state unlocks additional moves, allows recoverable damage to be inflicted against a blocking opponent, and can be ended instantly by triggering Heat Smash (a powerful move that can be blocked, but takes out a tasty portion of your opponent's health bar if it connects). The Heat timer pauses while damage is dealt or your opponent is down, further encouraging that aggressive play.

Rage returns, meaning that when your health is low you deal more damage, and have access to your most powerful move (which can do *enormous* damage). Rage and Heat combine to mean that some rounds can be over within ten seconds or so, although that's only when one player truly overwhelms the other.

Tekken remains as tactical as ever. The faster you can learn your opponent's fighting style, the sooner you can make use of the intricacies of the systems, quite possibly without even realising it. If you're able to block a Rage or Heat move, it leaves the opposing player or CPU completely helpless for a brief but all-important moment. You can even – if you're feeling particularly confident in your skills – interrupt one of these super moves with a simple punch or kick.

Characters are perfectly balanced not only against one another in matchups, but also in terms of UI. They're all similar enough to ensure none feel out of place, while all moving and feeling different enough for a new player to require weeks to fully master and understand

Tekken's offered concessions to the more casual player for years, and continues to do so.

4 Winning a round with an outrageous Rage or Heat move is just so darn satisfying. **5** Don't worry, you can still make your characters look silly. **6** Dialogue can get slightly, er, heated when unleashing a powerful move during a fight.

them all (essential if you want to rise to the ranks of the best).

KICK AND COLLECT

We like the way each character's backstory and personality translates into play. We don't just mean King employing wrestling moves, or even the fact that Zafina's strongest attacks centre on her possessed arm. Our favourite example is perhaps the extroverted and energetic Azucena; one of her combos includes a taunt right before the final blow, leaving her open to attack yet adding an extra stroke of humiliation should the combo finish.

Every single fighter is a viable option, yet those differences mean that you'll zero in on one or two once you get a feel for the game. Perhap Yoshimitsu or Reina, as they have quick and simple escape moves? Victor, as his gun and teleportation can make him unpredictable? Paul, as his hair is thick enough to suffocate a fully grown bear?

A lot of thought has gone into the online side of things, too. There will be tournaments, and there's an explorable lobby system with avatars, which Arcade Quest is partially intended to prepare you for. If you prefer to simply jump into a fight from the menu, however, that's still an option.

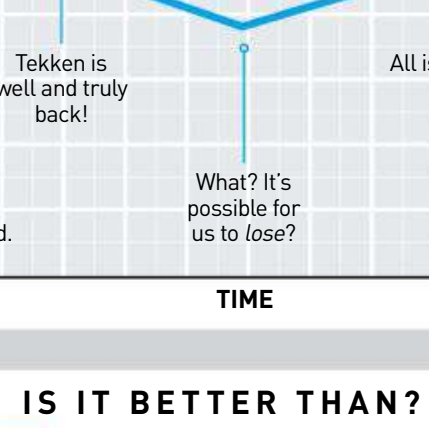
Servers only went live a few days before we had to karate-kick this review to the printer, but we still got a taste of online play – and we were impressed. Load times were short, without a whiff of lag. Online or offline, you can bet that we'll be kicking backside (and getting ours kicked) for a long time to come.

The most welcoming Tekken for beginners, yet also the definitive experience for fans. Kicks the competition to the kerb, and finishes it off with a flashy move. **Luke Kemp**

9
PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: TEKKEN 8



7% Being juggled by an opponent with an air combo. We hate air combos.

25% Turning a match around in the final seconds with a Rage Art.

7% Juggling an opponent with an air combo. We love air combos.

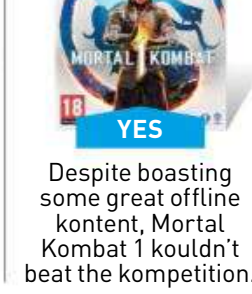
16% Trying the various story modes, trying to make sense of them.

5% Making your characters and profile pretty with the customisation options.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

AZUCENA
Coffee magnate and MMA champion. A job combo you won't see anywhere else.

ZAFINA
Has a glowing purple arm possessed by Barney The Dinosaur. We think.



DEVIL JIN
We're not sure he knows what he's doing. We think he's just winging it.

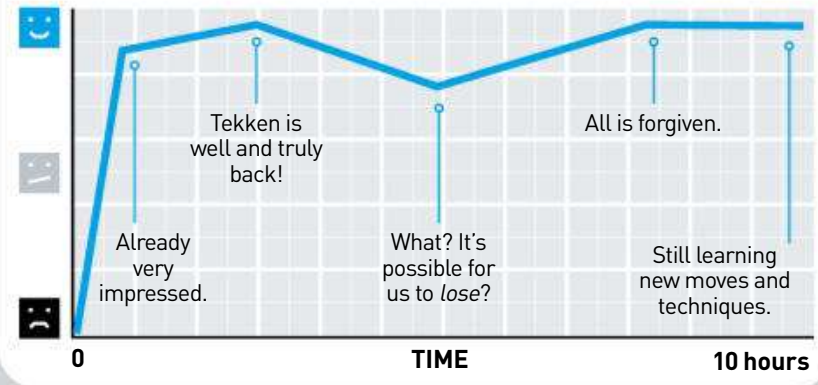
STATPACK

16
Stages. They all look great but don't distract, and some have special events or destructible borders to change the backdrop.

32
Characters. The new additions are Reina, Azucena, and Victor. Others return from across the series, but where's Bob? We miss Bob! DLC, we hope.

10
Million – the fight money you're given for finishing Arcade Quest. Worth playing through for that alone, so you can buy lots of silly hats.

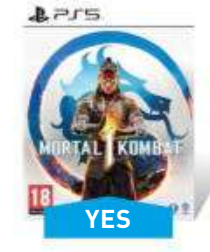
COMPEL-O-GRAPH



IS IT BETTER THAN?

YES
With everything dialled up to 11, the new Tekken surpasses the previous series entry.

YES
This is so so close, and they're both brilliant, but Tekken 8 manages to beat Street Fighter 6 on points.



YES
Despite boasting some great offline kontent, Mortal Kombat 1 kouldn't beat the kompetition.

BlueSky's games make playing as a human feel dangerous, but not completely disempowered.

Jurassic Park Classic Games Collection

Should-you-play-a-saurus?

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £24.99
ETA Out now
PUB Limited Run Games
DEV Limited Run Games, Ocean Software, BlueSky Software
PLAYERS 1-2
LENGTH 10 hrs approx
ACCESSIBILITY Rewind and save states make the games easier

Preservation is a fantastic thing, and we have to commend Limited Run Games for stuffing this collection with dino DNA. The publisher's Carbon Engine allows for some wonderfully accurate ports here that throw us right back to the '90s. But aside from that this is a basic package, and, lovely though it is that these are now playable, they aren't great.

What you get here are Ocean's Nintendo offerings (three versions of its Jurassic Park from NES, SNES, and Game Boy, and two versions of Jurassic Park Part 2: The Chaos Continues from SNES and Game Boy) and BlueSky's Sega Mega Drive games Jurassic Park and Jurassic Park: Rampage Edition. Oddly enough, the origins of some of these are obscured – most likely due to licensing restrictions. SNES is only referred to as '16-bit' for instance, and Game Boy as 'Portable', while Sega's console is simply called 'Genesis' (even though that was also a 16-bit console). There's no 'Sega' sting at the start either.

OLD FOSSILS

Similarly there's little in the way of bonus material to look at beyond maps. An aggressive CRT filter actually feels well implemented, genuinely replicating the look of my old TV back in the day. You've also got save states and a rewind feature – and you'll need it as life will find a way to screw you over in plenty of these games.

Ocean's original Jurassic Park titles are especially brutal, kitting Alan Grant out with a multi-ammo rocket launcher and throwing dinos at him from every angle. Goals are obtuse and maze-like, with the SNES version's rudimentary (and flat) first-person sections within certain buildings feeling hard to parse in a modern context. Meanwhile, The Chaos Continues games are much less interesting Contra-likes that are decent with a friend.

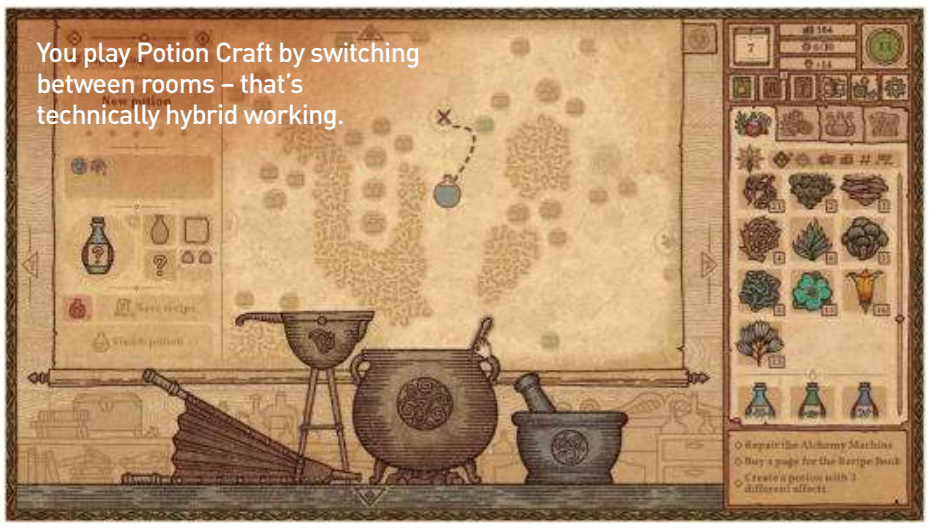
BlueSky's games go some way towards saving the collection. Both are fairly basic platformers that impress with massive dino sprites and detailed animations that convey the atmosphere of the movie (playing with my mum in the day, we screeched when the huge T-Rex head smashed through a wall). Grant having non-lethal weapons early on, such as tranqs that only briefly down the likes of dilophosauruses, is a nice touch, as is the option to play a briefer second campaign (in both games) as a raptor who can tear easily through human foes. Still, these also haven't aged too well (they're pretty clunky), and these ports are so accurate that the constant framerate slowdown can still grate.

True classics these are not. But odd curios deserve to be preserved too, especially licensed ones like these. Great? No. But I endorse this park.

A fairly basic collection of ports that we're glad exists, but these aren't must-play classics so much as curios for the gaming palaeontologists only. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

5 PLAY

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 (reviewed), PS4 **PRICE** £15.99
ETA Out now **PUB** TinyBuild **DEV** Niceplay Games **PLAYERS** 1


You play Potion Craft by switching between rooms – that's technically hybrid working.

Potion Craft

Double, double, toil and trouble

Some games just don't want to keep you guessing, and with a name like Potion Craft, this one tells you precisely what to expect. Potion Craft is an intuitive experience, easy to pick up and mildly frustrating to master at most. It's just you and a cauldron – and through careful crushing of ingredients and stirring of your spoon, you soon have yourself a potion.

The most important element in crafting potions is the potion map. Each ingredient, which you can harvest from your garden or buy from visiting vendors, describes a path along the map for a little potion flask icon. You always start from a fixed point on the map, and crushing an ingredient before putting it into a cauldron can lengthen the path you travel on the map before you come to a stop. A waterbloom, for example, will always lead east on the map. As you wander around the map by throwing ingredients into the cauldron and stirring them, you eventually land on a potion flask symbol. Potions vary in strength, depending on how exactly you overlap your potion icon with the symbol on the map. This offers the advantage that while there are optimal ways to arrive at a specific potion, there isn't one fixed way to make it.

A STIRRING TALE

Most of the time, you make potions to order. Customers queue at your shop with requests every day, and you have all the time you need to deliver. However, the fact that you only uncover the alchemy map as you try out different combinations of ingredients and thus neither know what's available nor where it is turns Potion Craft into a guessing game early on. Would the customer asking for a potion for lockpicking want something to make her more adept at the job, or does she need something to help her brute-force it? It's all a matter of trial and error. It can be annoying to use a bunch of ingredients only to realise you've made the wrong potion. Like your brews, Potion Craft is fun in small doses, though this road to alchemical mastery requires patience.

> **You only uncover the alchemy map as you try out different combinations of ingredients.**

We don't want to call this the Dark Souls of potion crafting, but in this game the journey is the destination, and your path will be littered with failed potions. **Malindy Hetfeld**

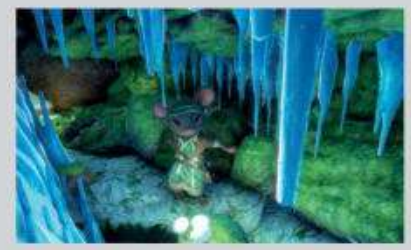
6 PLAY

THREE TO PLAY

PSN games you might have missed

Every month, loads of games come to the PS Store. You'd be hard-pressed to play them all, so we're looking at some that didn't quite make the cut for a full review. This month we're diving down warrens, jumping into foxholes, and leaping through time.

At the earliest point on our timeline is **War Hospital**, a narrative-forward management game from Polish developer Brave Lamb Studio. It's set during World War 1, where you're understaffed and undersupplied, and impossible decisions are your bread-and-butter. Made with support from the Imperial War Museum, you'd best believe these dire straits are well researched and believably bleak. Alas, there's something more dire still, and that's the voice acting. It's petty, we know, but in a project with such an otherwise keen attention to detail, it's a bombshell we can't easily ignore.

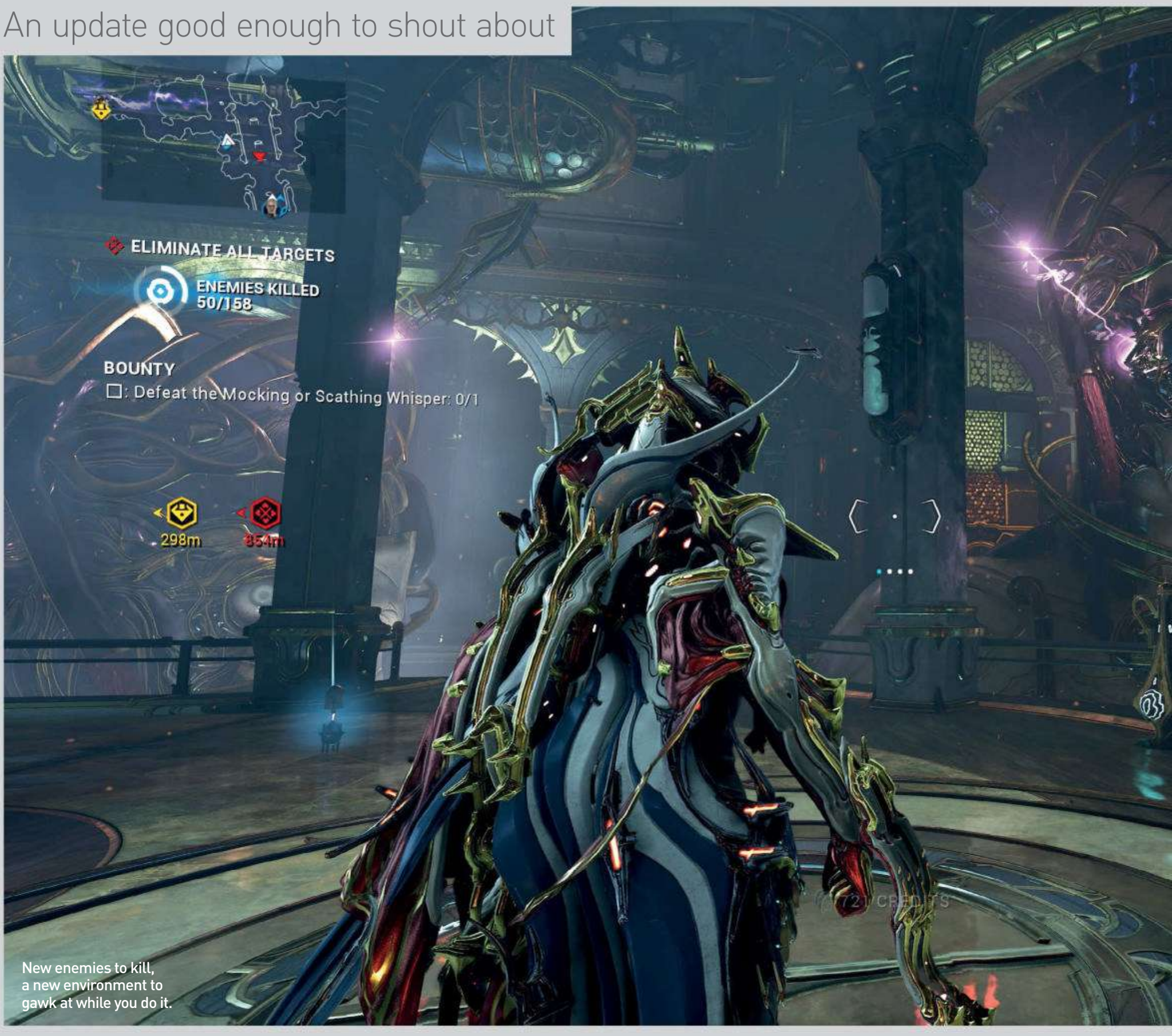


Moving away from the horrors of history, we depart for a close-to-the-ground fantasy. **The Lost Legends Of Redwall: The Scout Anthology** adapts Brian Jacques' series of books centring on an anthropomorphised cast scurrying around the British countryside. Once you've chosen one of two great mouse protagonists (in the form of betrothed couple Sophia and Liam), you use your nose to puzzle your way towards the titular abbey thanks to the unique scent system. On the one hand we're not sure why more books aren't adapted into games, though on the other there's no denying this one is let down by lacking a final layer of polish – it's a squeaky wheel that should've got some... cheese?

Finally, time waits for no-one – unless you really can't find that last hidden object. **Hidden Through Time 2: Myths & Magic** presents historically themed vignettes from down the ages, tasking you with picking through them in search of a list of objects. With a fresh fantastical twist, gorgons, witches, and more now hide in the frames of levels, or can be deployed to spice up your own creations in the map editor. Hidden object fans loved the chill vibes of the first game, and this sequel raises the difficulty – it turns out those gorgons are peekaboo champions for a reason! The rock-solid challenge may turn away series fans expecting a more sedate experience, but if 'gotta find 'em all' isn't usually your bag, perhaps you shouldn't overlook this release.

Warframe: Whispers In The Walls

An update good enough to shout about



New enemies to kill, a new environment to gawk at while you do it.

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE Free
ETA Out now
PUB Digital Extremes
DEV Digital Extremes
OFFLINE REVIEW N/A
PLAYERS 1 (story), 1-4 (everything else)
CROSSPLAY PS5, PS4, PC, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series

Warframe! *Hurgh*! What is it good for? Quite a lot, actually. While not intended for newbies – you need to have unlocked and completed The New War, and ideally Angels Of The Zariman as well – this update provides an excellent reason for lapsed players to come back, with a typically bold and surprising quest and a brand-new tileset to play around in.

Lasting a few hours at most, the story quest is nonetheless crammed full of juicy lore. It's yet another example of Digital Extremes being determined to try something new at every opportunity. In part, Whispers serves as a taster for the upcoming Warframe 1999 update, which is the source of much of the furious invention.

> Yet another example of Digital Extremes being determined to try something new.

Albrecht Entrati is thrust to the fore, his clothing and tech adapted from late '90s Earth. We won't drop spoilers, other than to say that the main quest offers a painfully brief playable tease of 1999. It's set in a subway station with Nine Inch Nails booming in the background, where you battle using a combination of an assault rifle and Warframe-style powers. The fusion of the contemporary and the futuristic has us excited for what's to come.

ENTRATI THE DRAGON

Here and now, the Necralisk opens up to reveal Albrecht's labyrinthine laboratories

beneath, which serve as the new tileset. More like a palace than a workspace, it's all gleaming surfaces, wide-open spaces, and grand curving staircases. This area also benefits from GI lighting which, while giving the graphics new depth, results in the framerate taking a hit. (Not nearly enough to affect play, but we're nonetheless hoping for further optimisation.)

The new enemy faction, the Murmur, is a mix of unnerving body parts thrown together to create faceless combinations of limbs and stone, plus some Nechramechs. A few existing mission types are reused (including an excellent Mirror Defence), while two are new. Alchemy tasks you with finding the correct elemental pickups for a communal pot – any you don't need can be hurled as weapons to inflict status effects. It's a good way to learn which combinations of elements create new ones, too. Netracell missions, meanwhile, allow you to nab a valuable reward up to five times a week. These are fun but challenging, with high-level enemies, so bring your best Warframe.

The update also introduces the 55th Warframe, Qorvex. You can, of course, buy him outright with Platinum, but we find grinding his blueprints and materials to be fairly quick and painless. Three of his four abilities are guaranteed to inflict Radiation status, and he's largely tuned for objective defence. With the right combination of mods, he becomes one of the best Warframes in the game.

QORVEXATIOUS

01

Qorvex doesn't have any healing, blocking, distraction, or rapid movement abilities. Tank him up with decent health and shield mods and this won't be a problem, as these stats can go very high for him.

02

Two Chyrinka Pillars can be placed down at once (place a third and one will disappear). Their short-range radiation pulses slow and damage enemies – great for defence and/or fighting Infested, who swarm you.

03

Containment Wall rapidly inflicts decent damage to a group of enemies directly in front of Qorvex, with a fair range. Any surviving enemies will be left with Radiation status. Useful when in a tight spot.

Intriguing and unexpected lore additions, a sumptuous environment, and great activity. There's more than enough to keep us happy until we party like it's 1999. **Luke Kemp**

8
PLAY

ExtendedPLAY

From updates to favourites – the games we just can't quit

The Last Of Us Part II Remastered

Bigger part, meet bigger parcel

Humorously, The Last Of Us is now a series with more rereleases than actual games, the PS3 original having been remastered for PS4 and remade for PS5 (plus it was recently adapted for TV), and the sequel now having a remaster of its own. But better than ever, packed with extra features, and upgradable for about a tenner, TLOU2 is worth the refresh.

The technical improvements you'd expect from a move from PS4 to PS5 are here, but as the game was already pushing the last-gen hardware to its limit it's definitely a case of diminishing returns. If you've got a VRR TV you can enjoy an unlocked framerate, fidelity mode offers native 4K, and performance mode can achieve an upscaled 4K.

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PUB Sony
DEV Naughty Dog
YEAR 2023

Textures have been improved, and with more detail at a greater distance as well. DualSense support makes the intense guerrilla-style third-person combat even snappier.

PARTY EVERY DAY

To be honest, as the original still feels incredibly impressive, this new-gen-native remaster isn't quite enough of a leap forward to hook me into a full replay. I dip in and out and marvel at the improvements made to some of my favourite set-pieces before I sort of forget they're present.

But what *does* hook me are all the other things added to this meaty reissue. One of these is Guitar Free Play, allowing you to dive deep into the detailed strumming system, switching guitars and environments. It's totally possible to just have a jam session, though I'm now

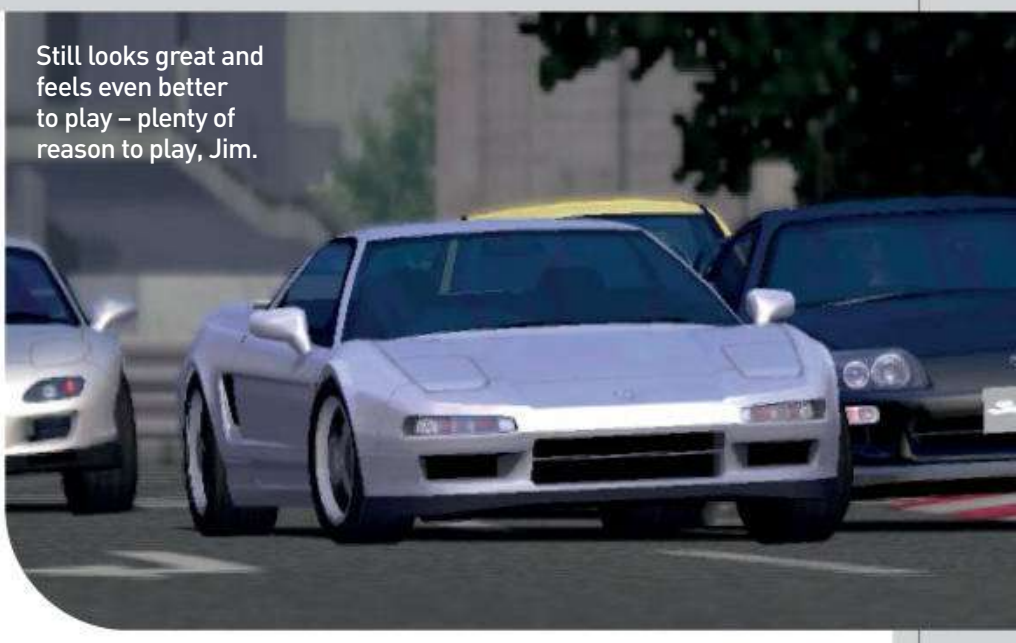
> DualSense support makes the intense guerrilla-style third-person combat even snappier.

Frank looks at cut content are fascinating. We'd love to see this approach become more common.

hankering for some kind of guitar-pick stylus to use with the DualSense's touchpad.

New commentary for the cutscenes provides some great insight, as do the commentary lines for three cut work-in-progress levels that showcase some great ideas that didn't work out. One that has Ellie navigating a twisting sewer is a particular highlight, with the devs talking through the goals and why the scene ultimately was trimmed for pacing.

Finally, No Regrets is a mode that answers the question 'Can extreme violence ever be justified for revenge?' with a firm 'Heck, yeah'. It might be off-message, but it's fun to grab upgrades and gear as you work your way through challenges to face a boss at the end. That said, even with a host of characters to play as – Dinah! Tommy! Uh, Mel? (Abby's crew scrapes the barrel a bit) – things get repetitive much faster than, say, God Of War Ragnarök: Valhalla (see last issue). Optimal play in TLOU2 can be slower, and as there *are* optimal strategies, and only so many mechanical twists, replays can get repetitive. And that's the last word. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**



Still looks great and feels even better to play – plenty of reason to play, Jim.

Gran Turismo 3: A-Spec

Driving lessons from the old masters

INFO **FORMAT** PS2 **PUB** Sony
DEV Polyphony Digital **YEAR** 2001

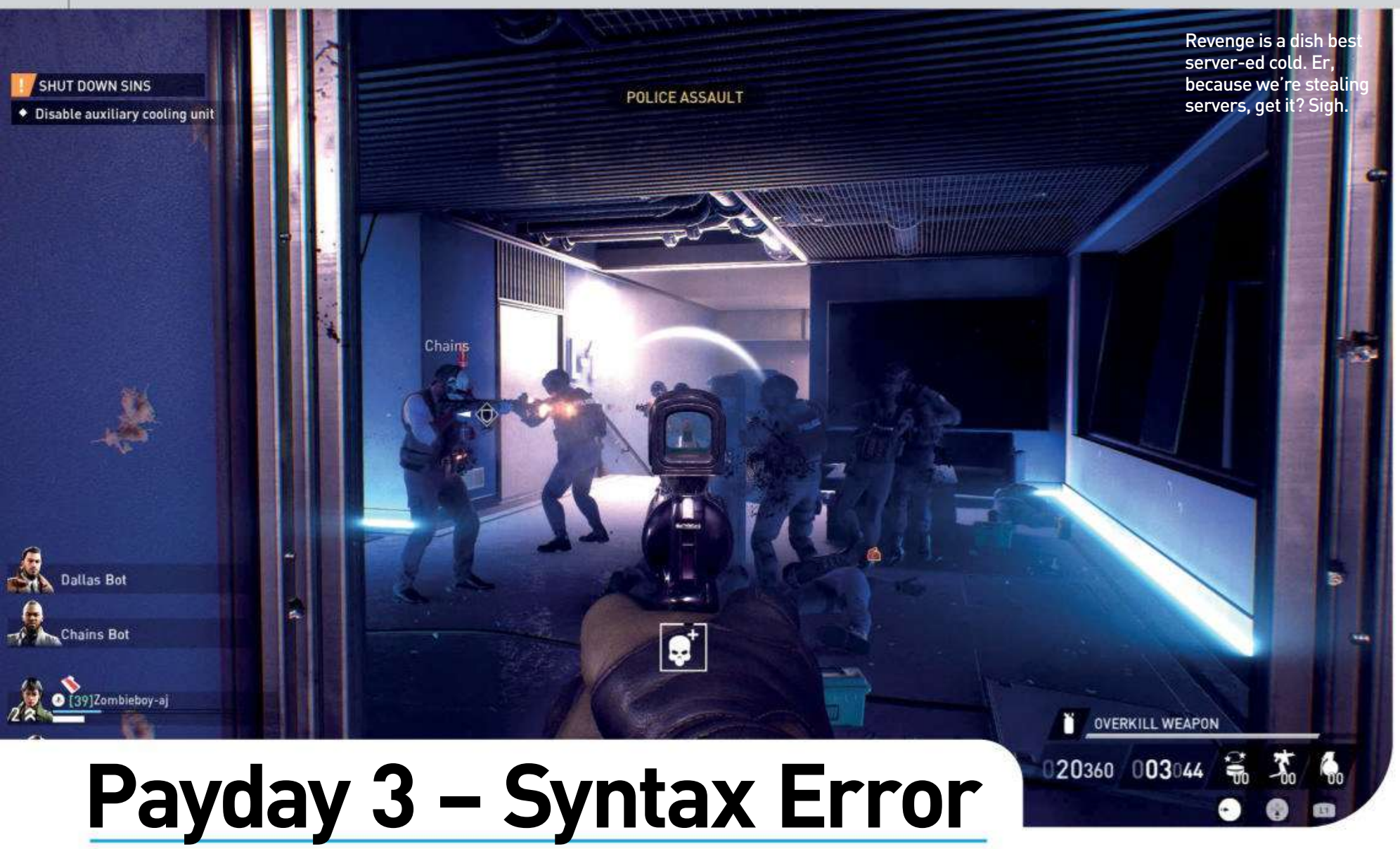
Former PlayStation boss Jim Ryan once infamously said that PS1 and PS2 versions of Gran Turismo "looked ancient, like why would anybody play this?" I admittedly didn't back in the day because I never fancied myself a sim racer, but the latest instalment had converted me and I was getting curious about its history. A-Spec felt like the natural choice, and as the second best-selling PS2 game of all time, it's cheap as chips to get secondhand.

> What surprises me is how after over two decades this game still looks incredible.

What surprises me is how after over two decades this game still looks incredible in the meticulous details of its cars, and it arguably has the best soundtrack, especially with Brit rockers Feeder.

The real distinction between now and then, however, is how much more hardcore these games used to be. Licence challenges make good tutorials, but you otherwise have to learn by playing. There are no visual assists like racing lines and brake zones – at most ABS is on so that you avoid spinning out – though trickier tracks effectively teach you to disable it altogether. There's also a lot of grind, especially when early races give you just 1,000 credits for coming in first, meaning you want your next part upgrade to be a meaningful investment.

Through the grind I'm not just memorising each track but coming to understand the incremental changes to my car, and why braking sometimes matters more than hitting top speed. Compared to the noob-friendly but overly streamlined structure of GT7, finishing GT3's Beginner League actually made me a better driver, so when I jump back into the latest title I'm finally able to turn off the assists. Sorry Jim, but you were wrong. **Alan Wen**



Revenge is a dish best server-ed cold. Er, because we're stealing servers, get it? Sigh.

Payday 3 – Syntax Error

Synning has never been this – well actually, it's been better

For all the controversy over AI, whether that's in art or writing, it's ultimately just a tool, no more or less intrinsically evil than a knife. We've decided that in videogames AI *is* evil though, as the one running the building security in this heister, where we're lifting unhackable servers from a data centre, tries to stop us stealing stuff. Unacceptable!

We have trouble finding players to do crimes with, for a few probable reasons – the £8 asking price for this chapter, which contains only a single heist, most likely among them. (You do also get a trio of additional weapons, plus – wait for it – a weapon charm and sticker.)

Anyway, setting aside our musings on whether we're getting value for money, we can sometimes get a full squad of players together with a bit of patience, but then we find other things to frown at. Being prevented from walking all the way around the outside of the building while looking for an alternative way in is bad enough; being told off for trying to go up one flight of stairs too many once we're inside is even worse.

The limits on our movement are disappointing, but easy to forget once things get going. Each of our heist attempts starts stealthily and at some point crumbles into combat, but that's fine with us. The design of the building – especially the lowest level, with chokepoints and server rooms full of cover – works excellently for it. Our turret gets a lot of use.

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PUB Plaion
DEV Starbreeze Studios
YEAR 2023

NURSERY CRIMES

While mechanically grabbing servers isn't too different to grabbing jewellery or bags of cash, the nature of the data centre environment means things take a high-tech turn. There's a new enemy type, in the form of armed drones, which is welcome. We're less pleased to see the return of the game's imperfect signposting when it comes to knowing precisely where to go and what to do in order to progress the heist, but naturally a few runs eliminates that issue. We're reminded how irritating it is that most actions are unavailable while unmasked, though, and that your mask is apparently welded to your face once it's on…

Avoiding the drones does work slightly differently to avoiding human security in the base game – they have motion sensors, for one thing. As we say, our runs tend to get rather chaotic with people moving all over the place, but not alerting the drones is an extra layer to plan for if you have a team that's on the same stealthy page. This, combined with a few different ways to access the server rooms, adds a sprinkle of desperately needed variety to proceedings.

> Each of our heist attempts starts stealthily and at some point crumbles into combat.

The AI guardian idea is unfortunately underdeveloped and underused, but it still results in a heist that distinguishes itself from all the others. **Luke Kemp**

Alan Wake 2 – Final Draft

Making an ocean out of a lake

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 **PUB** Epic Games
DEV Remedy Entertainment **YEAR** 2023

Even when faced with a pre-release bug that complicated our review plans, little has dampened my excitement to dive back into this knotty mystery. This is for a few reasons, such as the gorgeous visual direction, a cracking videogame forest that's always a pleasure to galumph through, and writing that rewards multiple readings.

Final Draft is Alan Wake 2's recently added New Game+ mode – one that comes with a twist, of course. In addition to carrying over the upgrades and weapons you picked up in previous playthroughs, Final Draft introduces story details such as new monologues and even fresh manuscript pages for Saga to collect.

The additions ultimately amount to quite slight changes across what is, on average, a nearly 20-hour game, though that's not to say you shouldn't return to Cauldron Lake. Full of callbacks and echoes forward, the story is well worth revisiting, especially when your knowledge of what's to come paints already-memorable lines in a fresh light. I always did struggle with tense shift…

But besides expanding on the questions about art and creativity that were already beating out a compelling bassline, Final Draft closes part of the loop. Sometimes nothing is scarier, whether it be a blank page or a seemingly endless dial tone, and you could argue that a lingering note of uncertainty when all is said and done will always be more memorable. Final Draft instead offers a crumb of closure for one plot thread that weaves particularly close to the heart – and honestly, I'm relieved to know how things turned out.

Introduces story details such as new monologues and even fresh manuscript pages.

Before I get lost talking in circles or otherwise spoil things by revealing a key piece of information, I'll just say this: the story remains far from over. In fact, I'm looking forward to seeing where Remedy takes things from here, both in the planned Alan Wake 2 DLC and its wider connected game world (we already know Control 2 is in development). Now, if you'll excuse me, there's a particular manuscript that requires my attention. **Jess Kinghorn**

Offering a crumb of closure, the Final Draft is both ending and beginning.

Gaston hasn't asked for five dozen eggs yet, so that's a plus.

Disney Dreamlight Valley – A Rift In Time

Don't look a rift horse in the mouth

INFO **FORMAT** PS5, PS4 **PUB** Gameloft
DEV Gameloft **YEAR** 2022

The end of 2023 was big for the House Of Mouse's valley – including a Halloween star path that led to Jack Skellington joining your town just in time for Christmas. But in addition to the free updates came the game's first fully-fledged DLC expansion, adding more characters and even biomes, which themselves include additional things to harvest and animals to befriend.

Rift In Time also introduces a Royal Tool, the Hourglass, which allows you to bend time. It's mostly useful for clearing up Eternity Isle's own-brand debris, but also allows you to pull junk out of the ether which you can then use to make furniture or upgrade the Hourglass further. Zipping around following a magic metal detector is surprisingly enjoyable, if taxing on the stamina. A stack of meals in the inventory is recommended for such an endeavour.

All this means there's a lot of organising to do, over two islands now. Spring cleaning already? Well, you've got to do it some time. It's not just cranking out storage chests either. The added ability to remove characters from your valley means any ongoing vendettas against noisy princesses or big guys who have body-blocked you in the mines can now be resolved.

Zipping around following a magic metal detector is surprisingly enjoyable.

While Rift In Time's £24.99 price may seem offputting, it's stuffed to the brim, with further instalments outlined on the roadmap. Each coincides with a free update so there's something for the non-DLC players too, but so far it really seems worth it. And characters will start wanting DLC-only items as their favourite gifts for the day so there's that. Kind of hard to give someone roasted almonds if you don't have almonds yet. **Max Williams**

PS5 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE NEW GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01

Baldur's Gate 3

Based on fifth edition Dungeons & Dragons, developer Larian has apparently bottled the essence of only our most electric tabletop sessions to serve up an incredible RPG return. Offering a wealth of options for crafting your own adventurer – and 'yes, and-ing' your choices all the way – the story of how you become the titular city's saviour (or tyrant) feels distinctly your own at every turn.

02

Resident Evil 4

Neither losing sight of its legacy or Leon S Kennedy's characteristic wit, this ground-up remake of one of the best survival horror shooters of all time boasts sharply honed combat, gloriously gory visuals, and even allows Ashley just a touch more independence.

03

Deathloop

Everything we love about Arkane's detailed, dense, and destructive gameplay in a game you'll keep coming back to. Unavoidably, as hero Colt's trapped in a time loop until he can pull off eight kills in a day, while being hunted by Julianna (who can be controlled by another player).

04

Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart

A delightful return for the lombax/robot duo, using PS5's power to allow seamless portal hopping and stunning vistas and DualSense to give the comically large arsenal real oomph. A real showpiece that feels marvellous in the hands, and makes the case for PS5 exclusives.

05

God Of War Ragnarök

Mastercrafted to the point that would make Brok and Sindri blush, this apocalyptic father-son adventure pushes Kratos and Atreus to their limits. Building on the last game, everything from combat to level design is snappier, and it's a gorgeous end to the world.

06

Alan Wake 2

Remedy lets its freak flag fly in this twisting tale of two protagonists. As both FBI profiler Saga Anderson and author Alan you crisscross realities, blasting Taken and chasing pages. Layered, even a touch experimental, you've not heard one quite like this before.

07

Demon's Souls

Not many games allow you to feel the thrum of a gigantic heart in the controller. From sword slashes against nightmarish creatures to feeling magic fill your hands, this stunning recreation of the PS3 classic is a tour of just what makes PS5 so great.

08

Uncharted: Legacy Of Thieves Collection

The best got better. Presenting Nathan Drake's final outing alongside spin-off The Lost Legacy, this collection implements a range of PS5 features. Higher framerates smooth out the action, haptic feedback boosts gunfights, and 3D audio adds a new dimension to the banter.

09

Final Fantasy VII Remake Intergrade

Cloud and the gang get a glow up with better visuals and slicker combat that Limit Breaks this bold reimagining of the Midgar section. Yuffie joins in with an extra story that bridges the gap between this and what's to come, cleverly playing on nostalgia and fan expectation.

10

Marvel's Spider-Man 2

Two heroes prove to be better than one with this smart sequel. The incredibly lush NYC is bigger, and slicker to web-swing and web-glide around, and missions have you brawling and sneaking through some superbly designed and unique areas. Spidey senses tingled.

11

Control Ultimate Edition

Jesse Faden's mind-bending, environment-destroying, object-chucking, new weird adventure sings on PS5. A framerate of 60fps delights, and Remedy's use of ray tracing is among the best we've seen. The sole problem is you're able to pick only one of two visual options.

12

Dead Space

This remake is a reminder that the USG Ishimura is one of the best science-fiction haunted houses in the biz. Modernising touches not only give Isaac Clarke a voice but also keep long-time fans guessing by reinventing familiar necromorph encounters.

13

Hitman 3

On PS5, Agent 47's latest hit list looks beautiful – oh boy, those reflections! The good news is not only can you play the latest missions on PS5, you can replay all missions from Hitman and Hitman 2 inside IO's new PS5-developed engine. That's *a lot* of content.

14

Humanity

Channelling the bizarre spirit of PS1 puzzlers, this surreal quest to guide a populace through blocky mazes leans on modern tech to deliver sheer scope and spectacle. It helps that you, as a little shiba inu, must lead the way, becoming humanity's saviour.

15

Final Fantasy XVI

With a mixture of DMC-like action and a mature story peppered with wonderfully deployed regional slang (like 'nowt's) this reinvention feels fresh while also building on past entries' themes. Lacking quirky edges, it's almost too polished – but it's still a treat.

16

Astro's Playroom

Free and pre-installed on your PS5, this is more than a showcase for your new console's best, most innovative features. Astro's Playroom is a beautifully crafted, if short-lived, platform adventure that takes a tour through everything that makes PS5 so special.

17

Street Fighter 6

The streets come to PS5 in spectacular fashion. With a mix of fan-favourite fighters and excellent newcomers, the fighting is easier to get into than ever, yet just as deep. An in-depth story mode is more middleweight, but still vibrant and fun. An excellent round.

18

Monster Hunter Rise

Though its maps may be smaller than those of Monster Hunter: World, everything else is souped-up, whether that's inventive new animal allies, your weapon combos, the vibrant feudal Japan styling, or the rampaging monster hordes. Go big... and save your home!

19

Gran Turismo 7

Like taking a bath in luxury motor oil while Yamauchi and the rest of Polyphony Digital relax you with cosy car history. The good vibes are matched by fantastic visual fidelity, and car handling enhanced by the DualSense controller for unparalleled driving feedback.

20

Solar Ash

Playing like a cross between Jet Set Radio and Sonic, gliding through the Ultravoid feels buttery-smooth. The subtle rumble of the DualSense offers an immersive layer to both movement and the action of pinning down an enemy. This is well worth losing yourself in.

21

Neon White

Fusing Doom-like blasting, speedy platforming, and card-based puzzling together in one heady, lightning-fast mix, Neon White is a jolt to the system like little else. Pure, electric gaming bliss that'll have you playing again and again to shave seconds off your best times.

22

EA Sports FC 24

FIFA's replacement represents a total overhaul. Men and women are mixed together in FUT to create limitless Three Lions/Lionesses combos. Individual PlayStyles transform gameplay, while presentation is as good as we've ever seen. Golazzo.

23

Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty

A soulslike without stamina? It's just one of the many clever twists in this Ancient Chinese epic where qi governs your actions instead. Go on a tear, and positive energy (for you, not your dead foes) helps you keep the momentum going. Just don't let negative energy build.

24

Marvel's Midnight Suns

Mushroom-foraging friendship dates, a book club with Blade, and the Sorcerer Supreme's suspiciously small swimming trunks – this one's got it all. A deep affection for all things Marvel runs through this deck building RPG, and the writing and social mechanics charm.

25

Labyrinth Of Galleria: The Moon Society

Think outside the grid in this dungeon crawler. Break down the maze walls to reveal hidden chambers, jack up your party's attacks, and transfer cat skills into clowns (seriously) to master this devious RPG.

PLAY ON

Know what you like and looking for more? Here are alternatives to enjoy on your PS5

Astro's Playroom has been sitting in our hall of fame since PS5's launch – not bad for a free pack-in. If the little robo's platforming love letter to everything that came before has captured your heart, here are three other games to make you appreciate Astro all the more.

PICK #1

Astro Bot Rescue Mission

The Brave Little Coaster

If you already like Astro, then you can't go wrong with this side-scrolling adventure on the original PSVR. Astro's comrades have been scattered among the stars, and it's up to you to sniff out all 213 of 'em using the DualShock 4. As they're only little guys, you need to make use of VR's full range of motion while you comb over each level. To aid you, you're armed with a slew of gadgets, from a water gun to a hook shot, that impart a really playful sense of tactility.

PICK #2

Sackboy: A Big Adventure

Bags of fun

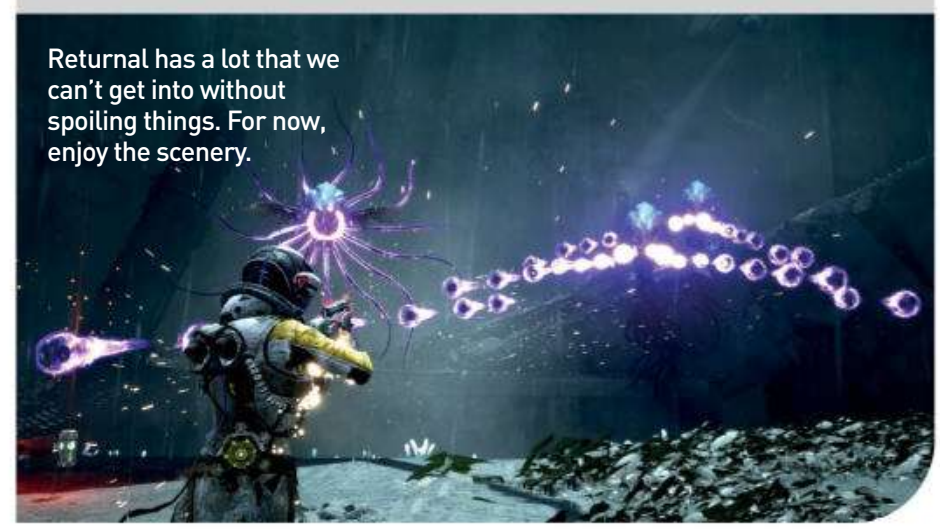
Is this column big enough for two PlayStation mascots? Absolutely! Developed by Sumo Digital, LittleBigPlanet's hessian hero ventures into fresh multiplayer mischief. Sans the much-loved level maker of the original series, the focus here is on teaming up to scoop collectibles and whack baddies in a world boasting a charmingly handcrafted vibe. Four friends can now jump in together online, which wasn't the case at launch – the more the merrier, we say.

PICK #3

Returnal

Bet you didn't see this coming

Okay, this bullet-hell-meets-horror-shooter seems an odd choice on such a downright adorable list. However, it does have one thing in common with Astro: impressive implementation of the DualSense's haptic feedback. While Returnal's guns feel all the more satisfying for how they use haptics, it's the subtler touches that have stuck with us. As we explore Atropos, rainfall pitter-patters in the palm of our hand – in the middle of a hellish loop, it's almost peaceful.



Returnal has a lot that we can't get into without spoiling things. For now, enjoy the scenery.

PS4 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE LAST GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01

Red Dead Redemption 2

You won't find another open world quite like this, the streets of Los Santos paling in comparison to this gorgeous, realistic western sprawl. Arthur Morgan's wild west adventure is epic, emotional, and has enough teasing mysteries on every horizon for no two cowboys' journeys to feel the same. With train robberies, tootin' headshots, and racists to kill, there's never a dull moment in Rockstar's greatest.

02

Grand Theft Auto V

Laughing in the face of other cross-gen ports, GTA V on PS4 is more than a mere HD remaster. Upped to a glorious 1080p, it weaves together everything that made the PS3 original great, with new music, more dynamic weather, and a game-changing FPS mode.

03

God Of War

A departure in some ways but a resounding return in others, Kratos is back with a son *and* a ruddy big axe. Taking the legend from Greek to Norse mythology, this entry brings a lot to the table while improving on what was core to the earlier series' identity.

04

The Last Of Us Part II

Arguably the original is holistically better but there are few games that push PS4 to its limits as this sequel does. With near-photoreal visuals, emotional twists that land, and enough new ideas to ensure you're always thinking, this is a slick followup.

05

Dreams

This is a feature-laden platform of artistic tools that enables you to create everything from characters, elements, and scenes to entire games, and resets any ideas about what a console 'game' should be and do. Dreams should be installed on every PS4.

06

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Game Of The Year Edition

The White Wolf's epic journey is an RPG experience like no other on PS4. It's been made even more spectacular with this gigantic pack stuffed with DLC, making it a must-have part of any gaming library.

07

Assassin's Creed Odyssey

A beautiful open world where every Greek island tells a unique story, AC Odyssey is a epic in the truest sense, with lively writing, mythical beasts to battle, and a poignant Assassin's Creed story that lays the table for all the delicious lore to come. A brilliant spectacle.

08

Horizon Zero Dawn

A staggeringly large world that condenses cracking combat, accessible systems, and uncut eye candy into an action RPG that will please anyone. In Aloy, PlayStation might just have a new icon. Come for the robo-fights, stay for the exquisitely dense mythology.

09

Marvel's Spider-Man

Borrowing heavily from Rocksteady's acclaimed Batman series, this delivers the heart and soul of Marvel's superhero. It ticks every box you could ask for: perfect web-swinging, a powerful story, a roster of classic villains, and all of New York City to defend.

10

Persona 5 Royal

The most stylish JRPG ever made finds its definitive form in expanded release Royal. It combines dark and moving teen angst with unforgettable friendships that power you up in the heart-invading dungeons, and sets the gold standard for the genre.

11

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

FromSoftware's latest adventure repackages its unflinchingly difficult combat into a fantastical take on feudal Japan. More accessible than Bloodborne but layered with equally clever and subtle ideas, this is director Hidetaka Miyazaki's best yet.

12

Bloodborne

With the finest third-person melee combat in gaming, droolworthy art design, and the most twisted monsters imaginable, this is a gorgeously gothic must-have. The Old Hunters expansion adds enough nightmare fuel to make a return to Yharnam essential.

13

Monster Hunter: World

Presenting a vibrant open world, light on story but heavy on monster-mashing action, this is the most accessible entry in the series yet. Perfecting the feel-good grind through its complex systems and pitch-perfect multiplayer, it's a PS4 must-play.

14

Resident Evil 2

Powered by the RE Engine, this remake is more than a classic game with a facelift. The new Tyrant and improved zombie AI add tension, and fresh areas not seen in the PS1 classic update the core gameplay making this Resi 2 a celebration of PS1 *and* PS4.

15

Yakuza 0

Set in Japan in the '80s, this is the perfect entry point to the long-running series. Bouncing between two heroes, you take part in a crime thriller by bashing enemies into dropping piles of cash, and undertake side-quests that include stealthily buying pornography.

16

Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

Solving your own murder seems hard enough, but you quickly find it's a single domino in a whole conspiracy run. Fortunately, as a ghost, that's where you shine, controlling objects poltergeist-style to untangle puzzle-box murders moments before others cop it.

17

Psychonauts 2

Level design and narrative mesh together in this long-awaited sequel. Bounce around vibrant, ever-creative platform worlds inside other peoples' minds as you help them conquer trauma – and save the world. Ever-warm, the script is one of the funniest around.

18

Nier: Automata

Few games require immediate replaying, but this *demands* it. The twisty-turny story reveals more just when you think you're done, and the android combat as you explore is top-notch thanks to PlatinumGames' expertise in creating character action titles.

19

Mass Effect Legendary Edition

A space opera in game form. Explore the galaxy as you try to stop a universe-wide threat, building a team of the best as you go. The adventures are better than ever in this smoothed-over version. A fan of science-fiction sagas? You owe it to yourself to have one of your own.

20

Days Gone

On the surface this seems to be a step backwards: a testosterone-fuelled Freaker-killing adventure, one man and his bike versus the apocalypse. Slowly you realise Bend Studio's playing with you, and everything's flipped on its head – while the action's excellent throughout.

21

Dragon Quest XI: Echoes Of An Elusive Age

JRPGs don't get more classic-feeling than this, but DQ embraces its traditional qualities, giving its turn-based fights and Toriyama-designed visuals a modern overhaul. This is an adventure that'll stick with you.

22

Dishonored 2

The followup to a PS3 great, mixing a creative skillset with impressive level design to create a Kaldwin-ning immersive sim. From the shifting rooms of The Clockwork Mansion to learning to link your powers, there's so much scope for experimenting.

23

Alien: Isolation

Explore Ridley Scott's original vision of a horrifying future in startling fidelity, as this game recreates the tension with an attention to detail that borders on the obsessive. It's time to remember what made the xenomorph so scary... and then get killed by it.

24

Shadow Of The Colossus

Bluepoint completely overhauls the visuals of Team Ico's masterpiece but still manages to match the original step-for-step in its remake. New controls and a beautiful photo mode add to the package. Wander's tragic quest has never looked or played better.

25

Tekken 7: Definitive Edition

The title for best fighter on PS4 is fiercely fought over, but for our prize money King remains the, er, king. Easy to pick up, with plenty of depth, few fighters feel quite as crunchy as this. With all DLC characters now released, from Noctis to Negan, it's time to get sweaty.

TAYLOR MADE DEALS

Watching the pennies? We'll help you play more without breaking the bank

UNDER £20

Uncharted: Legacy Of Thieves Collection

£19.85 approx (PS5, hit.com)

At this price it's a steal

Both of Uncharted's PS4 games in one package, lovingly remastered to make the most of the newer hardware (though even the original versions still look gorgeous). In Uncharted 4: A Thief's End, Nathan Drake returns to his treasure-hunting life for one final job that'll tie up the loose threads that have haunted him for years, and in Uncharted: The Lost Legacy, Chloe Frazer and Nadine Ross rise from the supporting cast to take the lead in a shorter corker.

UNDER £15

Like A Dragon: Ishin!

£14.95 approx (PS4, thegamecollection.net)

Studying the blade

You can get a better price on this PS4 blue box and be given access to two versions to boot, as it comes with an upgrade to the PS5 version. This PS3 remake fills a hole for many Yakuza fans, as when this spin-off first released it wasn't deemed of interest to Western players owing to how it closely follows Japanese history. But even if you know nothing about the Bakamatsu period, the Shinsengumi, or Sakamoto Ryoma (who is 'played' by Kiryu – faces return from Yakuza games) you'll still be drawn in – and who doesn't love brawling with guns *and* samurai swords?

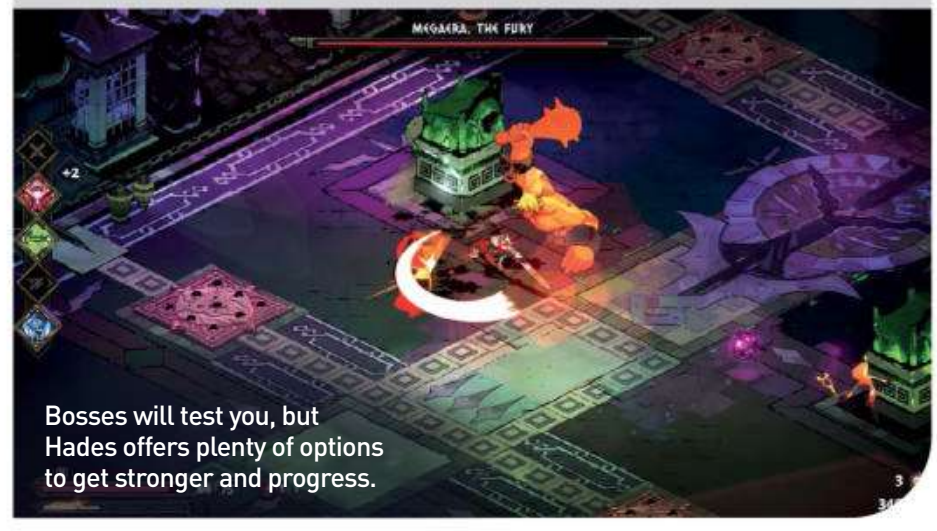
UNDER £10

Hades

£9.95 approx (PS4, thegamecollection.net)

This deal is underworld-deep

Like Ishin, this deal comes with a second life thanks to a free PS5 upgrade for anyone nabbing the PS4 version. Rightly lauded on initial release, this is one of the smartest, most mechanically satisfying roguelikes around. As Zagreus tries to escape his father Hades' domain, his cycle of 'death' and rebirth is tied into the narrative, his relationships evolving just as much as his arsenal and abilities. Combining melee combat with ranged skills, going from struggling to deftly dodging screen-filling attacks makes you feel every bit as skilled as Zag himself.



Bosses will test you, but Hades offers plenty of options to get stronger and progress.

PSVR2 Hall of fame

THE VIRTUAL REALITY HITS YOU HAVE TO PLAY

01 Synapse

Telekinesis and guns make a wonderful combo in VR. With one mapped to your left hand and the other to your right, you feel like a conductor of chaos as you blast your way through a rogue colonel's mind to uncover secrets. Eye-tracking is wonderfully used to target your telekinesis, meaning you can slam enemies all over the place as you reload your arsenal. It's got a roguelite structure, so you'll keep coming back.

02 Horizon: Call Of The Mountain

Manages to make level after level of climbing compelling with different environments to pull yourself up through, the Sense controllers allowing for neat player expression. Just make sure you take a break, or all that spider monkeying will make your arms throb.

03 Star Wars: Tales From The Galaxy's Edge

Who shot first? *You.* Tactile controls make being a droid techie-turned-scoundrel a blast(er), from pulling gear off your body to using tools to meddle with machines. A bonus mode allows for lightsaber waggling too.

04 Rez Infinite

When you thought Testuya Mizuguchi's synaesthesia shooter was done, it moves to a new beat. Laden with sharp particle effects, twitchy controls make this unmissable, with eye-tracking aiming a revelation for this experiential shoot-'em-up.

05 Tetris Effect: Connected

While also on PS5, Mizuguchi's trippy, transcendent take on the block-based puzzler is nothing short of a masterpiece in PSVR2, placing you within a world of tumbling tiles like never before, enhanced from the base version with more collaborative elements.

06 No Man's Sky

The frontier is far from final, this free refresh for the latest headset propelling you to the stars. All the prior updates are here, and you've an unmatched level of fidelity to reach out and touch the bizarre randomly rolled planets you uncover (and to fiddle with your ship).

07 Moss: Book II

Both rodent puzzle platformers benefit from PSVR2 enhancements, but the star performer of the pair is this sequel that's every bit the mouse's whiskers. As charming as ever, expanded combat options mean you feel even more connected to your li'l hero, Quill.

08 Gran Turismo 7

Ever driven a car? Then you'll know what to expect. GT7's already incredible simulation races gain a new level of immersion simply from checking your GPS and mirrors and seeing the courses whizz by. It's only a new view mode, yet it's enough to be a must-try.

09 Before Your Eyes

Blink and you will indeed miss it. Put down the Sense controllers, as here you interact using eye tracking, piecing together your life scene by scene, progressing whenever your peepers close (generously, the mechanic can be turned off if you want to see everything).

10 Song In The Smoke Rekindled

The devs have taken great pains to ensure this stripped-back survival game remains immersive at all times, placing much of what you need to do, from skinning pelts to pinging arrows, directly in your hands. Be careful to keep the dark at bay at night, too.

11 The Last Clockwinder

This spatial puzzler is all about putting things in the right place, whether that's flinging objects around or putting yourself to work. Thanks to the ability to summon clones, you're quite the helping hand (now if only we could do that at PLAY Towers).

12 The Last Worker

Work hard, revolt harder. As a token final human working alongside machines in a send-up of big online retailers, you need to balance the oddly compelling mundanity of sorting and organising packages with sneaking around vents to bring down big business.

13 NEW Arizona Sunshine 2

The familiar survivalist beats of a 'one man against the apocalypse' setup are boosted by making that 'one man and his dog.' Zombie-offing action is already elevated in VR, but adding man's best friend to your arsenal makes this title one of the best in show.

14 Jurassic World Aftermath Collection

Clever girls for a clever game. You're looking to salvage research data from the dino park's ruins and get out alive, all while being hunted by 'raptors (like the tense scene from the original movie). Other dinos pop up, but the velociraptors are the focus, for better and worse.

15 What The Bat?

With your arms transformed into baseball bats, you must progress through loads of minigames that take you through different periods in your life. A great way to get used to 1:1 hand-tracking, the zany challenges are only let down by a slight lack of variety.

PSVR Hall of fame

GREAT EXPERIENCES TO THIS DAY

01

Astro Bot Rescue Mission

This pint-sized adventure packs charm in spades even if it isn't exactly chock-full of challenge. Bringing the classic puzzle platformer formula bang up to date in PSVR, it won't take many levels before you're calling out, "Beam me up, Botty!" Also, the nippers will love it.

02

The Persistence

This first-person horror roguelike offers perfectly sized chunks of survival bursts. It's everything you'd expect from a full PS4 release, but in PSVR it's filled with clever ideas, unique weapons, genuine jump scares, and fab looks – plus great couchplay as well.

03

Star Wars: Squadrons

A fan's dream come true: experience epic Star Wars space battles from the cockpits of the films' most famous starfighters. Whether you're flying a TIE fighter or X-wing there's absolutely no thrill like skimming the surface of a Star Destroyer in PS VR.

04

Resident Evil VII: Biohazard

Can you can go eye-to-eye with the Bakers? Playing in VR raises the tension to almost unbearable levels and has gameplay benefits such as face-aiming, which makes shooting a lot easier. A brilliant example of how VR can improve already great games.

05

Blood & Truth

The truth? You can't handle the truth. But if you can, then you'll discover one of PSVR's best shooters, tied to the kind of slick cinematic narrative we're used to from Sony's non-VR releases. Blood & Truth is one of the most complete games for PSVR.

06

Beat Saber

With your PSVR headset firmly on and PS Move controllers in hand, Beat Saber feels like the game both pieces of hardware were made for. In it you have to master songs and challenges by swiping your neon swords through the air and dodging with your head.

07

Iron Man VR

With a finely-crafted control setup that enables flight within small sandbox maps, and gives you the option to inhabit the designer shoes of the billionaire playboy too, Iron Man VR is an almost-perfect interpretation of the famous Avenger. It's a PSVR must-play.

08

Hitman 3

Every mission in the World Of Assassination trilogy can be played in PSVR via the latest entry in the series. That's a *lot* of murderous action. It all plays brilliantly too, with the act of puzzling through hits as Agent 47 perfectly suited to virtual reality. One of PSVR's best.

09

To The Top

This creative platform-puzzler enables you to scamper, jump, and skate across its 35 sandbox worlds with the aid of your PS Move controllers. It's as physically demanding to play as it is perplexing, and all the better for it. To The Top is a PSVR one-off.

10

I Expect You To Die 2: The Spy and The Liar

A spy comedy offering a front-row seated experience. Known as The Phoenix to your foes, you thwart villains across six missions delightfully steeped in genre tropes. Short, silly, and slick – like only the best agents.

WHAT'S NEW PLUS-SY CAT?

Digging into the random acts of gaming a lengthy PS Plus subscription offers

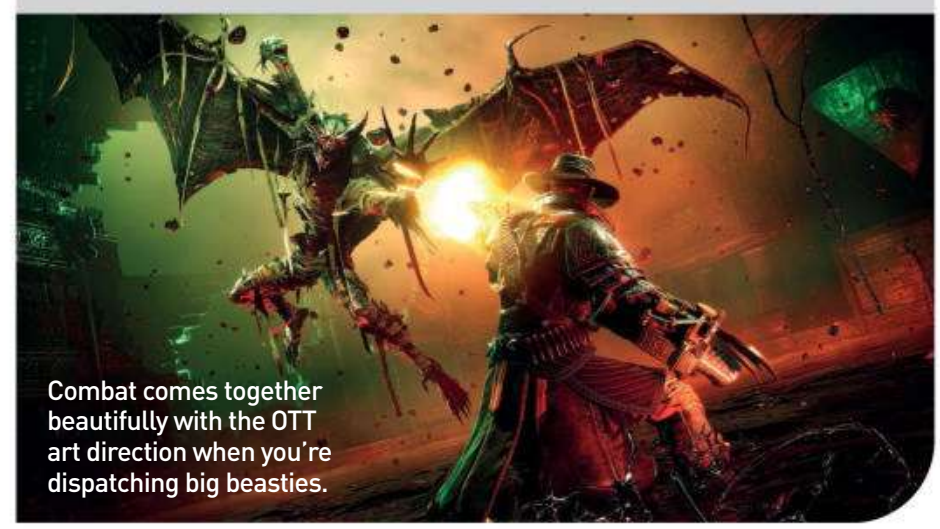
January's selection of monthly PS Plus games invited us to get up close and comfy with the supernatural. Only on PS5, there was the rat-tastic stealth sequel **A Plague Tale: Requiem**, while on both PS5 and PS4 there was shapeshifting puzzle-brawler **Nobody Saves The World**.

Closing out this month's selection is a game with bite – **Evil West** on PS5 and PS4. You play as the rootin' tootin' Jesse Rentier, a cowboy who loves his home – aside for all the damn vampires. In this throwback shooter, there's no time to ponder the philosophical horror of true immortality nor to muse over the fragility of one's own being when you're blasting bloodsuckers in the face.

You're well-equipped for the task of ensuring these vamps have ridden in their last rodeo; in addition to carrying the expected six-shot revolver and a rifle, Jesse has got his hands on – or should that be in – something extra-shiny: an electrified gauntlet. Equipped with this, combat becomes a dance between longer-range blasts and sparking melee haymakers.

It's bloody good fun, though the way it hews so close to the action adventure heavyweights of old means you can see the full shape of the thing from more than 20 paces away. Each mission hits broadly the same beats, sending hordes of the undead in your direction for you to dutifully dispatch, with only the briefest spatters of story in between to justify the next bloodbath. To put it another way, Evil West knows exactly what it is and sees little reason to spoil a good thing when it gets going.

'Formulaic' is absolutely the word, then, but when you're unlocking fresh abilities at such a steady clip – and oh-so-regularly emptying your clip – that may not be the worst thing in the world. If you don't mind the undying loop, this one's well worth getting your teeth into.



Combat comes together beautifully with the OTT art direction when you're dispatching big beasties.

DIGITAL OFFER

FOR PRINT SUBSCRIPTION DEALS, TURN TO PAGE 62

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PLAY
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RetroStation

113 A brief history of...

Sad dads – meet the men with the toughest job of all.

HIGHLIGHTS

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DON'T DELETE

Save icons for these February moments spin in the PLAY hive mind. Do you remember this?

5 YEARS

Apex Legends surprise-dropped onto PlayStation half a decade ago. No wonder we're not as good at this battle royale as we used to be, that's more than enough time to get rusty. Still being updated, can it pull off five more years?

10 YEARS

The launch of the English-language version of Danganronpa: Trigger Happy Havoc is a true milestone. Triggered by fan demand thanks to a mega-popular fan translation, it helped legitimise the visual novel genre for a new generation, and so led to more translations.

15 YEARS

You wouldn't expect a seemingly ego-stroking tie-in to be this good, but 50 Cent: Blood On The Sand is a genuinely rollicking arcade-style shooter (if you can roll with some jank and poorly aged depictions of its fictional SWANA setting).

MEMORY CARD

Final Fantasy VIII

25 years on, Squall's still the best-looking guy here

Having to 'draw' magic from your enemies during battle remains controversial.

Given its predecessor's huge success, FFVIII can often seem overlooked. Focussed on Squall as he meets a world-ending threat, some complex systems made this entry divisive. But for those who call it a favourite, it's a passionate love.

Like a lava-dripping Bomb, FFVIII oozes ambition, unmissable in the way it blurs the abstracted line FFVII drew between battles, exploration, and cinematics. "I loved the FMV cutscenes at age nine where the Robot Spider chases you," says reader **Bryan Neil Robson**. Another moment had you exploring space, and another worming through a festival; a whip-smart use of prerendered graphics.

PICK A CARD

Many readers were keen to tell us this is their favourite Final Fantasy (and they're in good company – it's FFXVI lead Ben Starr's too). But even so, many acknowledge FFVIII's clunkier aspects. One of these is the magic system that has you 'drawing' magic as an expendable resource from foes.

"I loved it. Just didn't like drawing magic though," says **Derek Smith**. But in some ways, imperfections show a game trying something new. "I don't understand the hate for this game," says **Rawa Hamza Meriwani**. "Sure [the] story can be convoluting at times and the [stat-boosting] junction system can be hard for some to get into, but this is a top-tier game, especially for its time."

▷ Join in the conversation as we celebrate PlayStation's past, present, and future with our community: you can email us at play@futurenet.com.

INFO

PUB Square
DEV Square
RELEASED ON PS1
RELEASE 1999
IF YOU LIKE THAT, TRY THIS... Persona 3 also features a strong cast of teens; meanwhile the Voice Of Cards series is all about drawing!

Replaying it now, it does feel like an odd duck – hard to grok in many ways, with a plot too clever for its own good. But that also makes it memorable. "It was a scope of never to [be] seen again, when you bought this multi-disc magic, you knew you had something special," says **@jaybirdie1**. It's not one you should miss out on.

BYTE-SIZE BITS

Essential numbers that add together to tell you everything you need to know about the game.

8,600,000

Copies were sold on PlayStation circa 2009 (here's to eight million more).

741

Days between Final Fantasy VII and this sequel. A quick turnaround!

22

Available GFs (giant, summonable monsters – sorry, romance fans).

DEFENDING

The Librarian

Justin Towell laments the death of Tunic's terrifying boss in the sky

The translated text underneath The Librarian's name as you reach the top of his tower and square up to fight him says it all: 'A thieving scholar who does not understand.' But this apparently damning description, while literal, may not really be damning at all. While his in-game manual illustration looks sinister and fighting him is hard, his truth is far deeper.

YouTuber Jess Zakilly has made several brilliant videos about Tunic's lore, but none have changed my thinking about the game more than her video about The Librarian. When you reach The Library, you'll see some of The Librarian's unfinished work laid out around the place. He's stolen a teleporter pad but can't activate it, despite knowing its importance. He knows his world is contained within a game cartridge, as you can see from his chalkboard sketches. He's spent his time trying to uncover the secrets of the glyphs and the magic of the Holy Cross, the latter in particular eluding him.

Then you come along and kill him, after which you find him as a ghost, slumped dejectedly in a chair, understandably annoyed. All his intelligence wasted by some upstart little fox surely destined to bring ruin like all the others. While you probably can't read it at first, his ghostly dialogue (quoted below) is damning indeed. He's the only character in the game who's seeking answers to questions that, painfully, you yourself may not be intelligent or curious enough to ask. Now he's trapped in apparent eternal consciousness. All he wanted was to understand, and to stop the Ruin Seekers' destructive cycle. His death is a tragedy, especially for his pet guardian – a little plinth on legs – who now totters around, hoping for someone to whom it can serve coffee. There's no-one. Sniff.

> HERE TO GLOAT? IDIOT. YOU RELEASED THE HEIR, AND NOW THIS. NOW YOU MUST DEFEAT IT AND TAKE ITS PLACE, OR FIND THE HOLY CROSS AND SHARE ITS WISDOM. GOOD LUCK WITH THAT."

He didn't count on our determination to unlock the Golden Path! Yeah, but he's still dead. Hmmm.

INFO

MAIN GAMES
Tunic

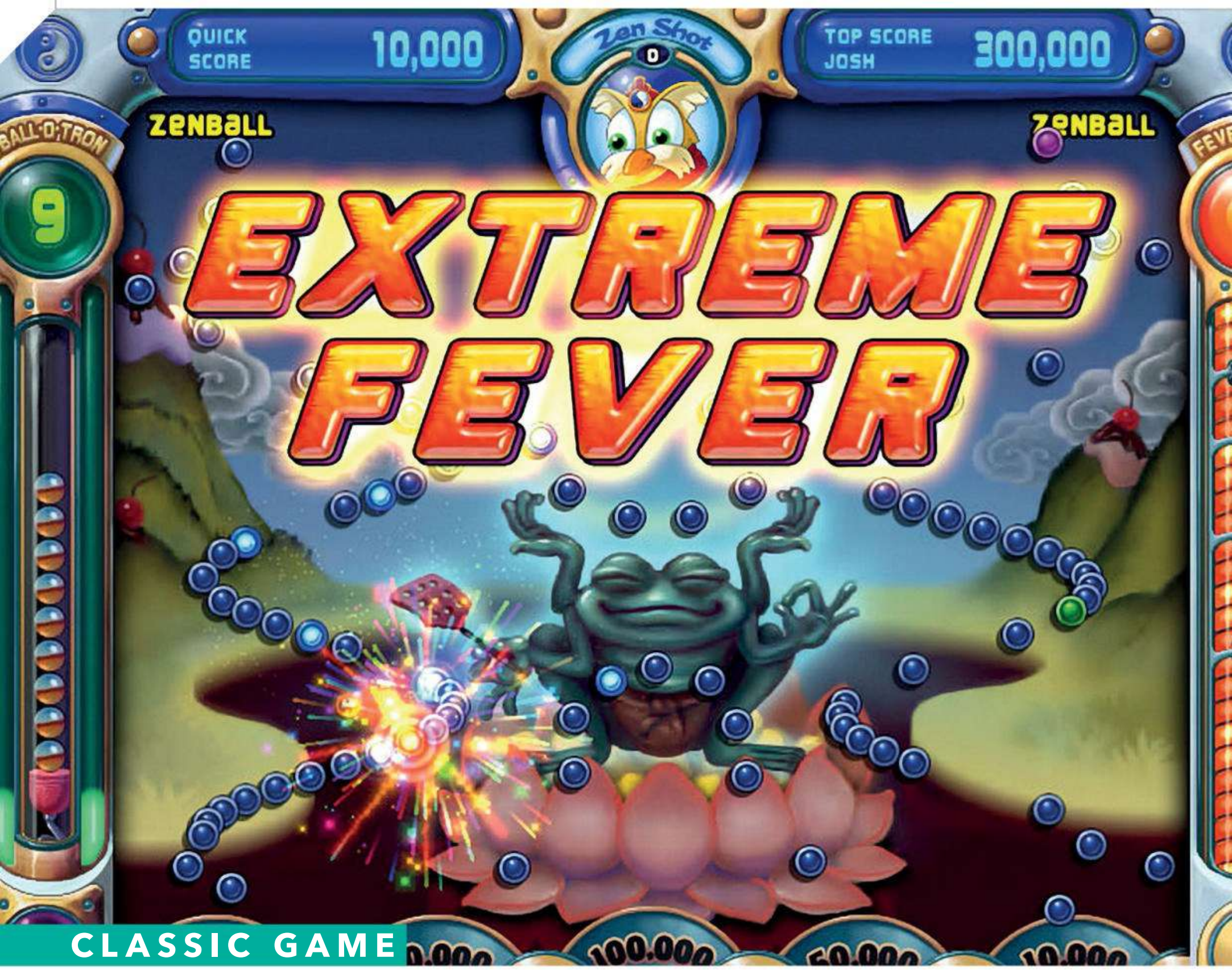
STATS
The manual page you find in the Library has coffee stains on it. The Librarian's coffee stains!

Tunic has two secret languages, one a decodable cypher, the other hidden in the game's melodies. Yes, *really*.

There's a hidden cheat code that lets your foxy character give his decoy fox toy a hug. Too cute.

SPIN-OFFS
N/A

HOW TO PLAY?
PS Store, £24.99; the physical PS4 release (playable on PS5), around £40



CLASSIC GAME

Peggle

Looking for an easy escape? It's time to peg it

1

2

3

4

1 Claude Lobster's special power introduces pinball-like flippers to the screen. 2 Challenge mode offers trickier versions of levels and battles against AI opponents. 3 Duel and Peg Party modes enabled local and online multiplayer competition. 4 Nice car. Be a shame if someone made it disappear. 5 Oh, the possibilities for block-busting combos...

PopCap has always created what we tend to call 'casual' games. From Bejeweled onwards the studio's specialised in titles that almost anyone can wrap their head around in seconds, and of all of them Peggle, on PS3, is perhaps the most casual. Yet while it's easy to pick up, Peggle can be equally difficult to put down, not least for seasoned gamers.

You wouldn't suspect it at first, but beneath Peggle's cheery shine there's a never-ending challenge to achieve perfection and chase the highest score. The game welcomes you with rainbows and unicorns, along with rousing bursts of Beethoven's Ode To Joy, as if its only care in the world is sparking smiles and happiness. And then all it asks of you is that you clear each stage by firing ball bearings from a cannon fixed to the top of the screen, aiming to hit every destructible orange 'peg' scattered among a mass of blue ones. To do so, you merely swing the cannon left and right to determine the angle of the next shot. Once the ball leaves the launcher, its fate is out of your hands.

At this stage Peggle is pleasant enough, like prodding away at a free slot machine, but there's much more to learn. True, you rarely know exactly what's going to happen to any shot you take, especially when a veritable buffet of pegs still remains, but there are many ways to nudge results in your favour. For starters, you soon notice points bonuses awarded to your level score for performing certain shots, which encourages you to try to replicate them. Try hitting an orange peg by rebounding the ball off the side wall, for instance, or hitting one on its side so the ball bounces right across the field into another.

More than nice little score boosts, though, such shots are also of tactical importance. The long shot across the screen is a great way of taking out isolated pegs while keeping the ball in play, for example, and with careful timing you can even be fairly certain it will end up in the bucket. You'll also get used to sending balls into curves of flat pegs to send them sliding along the whole row, like a finger gliding across the keys of a piano. In every turn, meanwhile, a randomly assigned purple peg boosts your points multiplier if you hit it, making it easier to gain an extra ball by scoring big from a single shot.

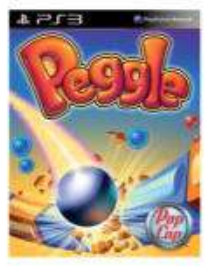
> **"Striking green pegs at optimum moments can (if you don't do it accidentally) send your points total through the roof."**

What you have in effect is thus a kind of pachinko-pinball hybrid, or in videogame terms an upside-down Breakout or Arkanoid where gravity is definitely *not* your friend. At first it seems as though your efforts are largely governed by luck. One shot into a cluster of pegs might ricochet repeatedly, blitzing the whole lot in satisfying style, while a near-identical shot into the same pack plops limply through after pinging off only a few. It also seems to come down to pure fortune whether the ball lands in the bucket that shuttles across the base of the screen, which returns it to your limited supply.

PINBALL WIZARDS

Most important, however, are the two green pegs randomly positioned at the start of each level, which trigger the special power of your chosen character, or 'Peggle Master' in the game's lexicon. These range from Bjorn Unicorn's Super Guide (which shows the path of your next shot) to Jimmy Lightning's multiball (which splits the ball in two) and Warren Rabbit's Lucky Spin (whose myriad possible effects include tripling the score of your current shot). Playing to their strengths and striking green pegs at optimum moments can (if you don't do it accidentally) send your points total through the roof.

With all these possibilities, you also realise that the peg layouts on each screen aren't merely pretty patterns but devious conundrums, especially when they contain moving parts that spark further timing considerations. By this point you'll be giving each shot at least some thought and making fine adjustments to the angle of trajectory before letting fly. You'll maximise those skill shots, clear all pegs – not only the orange ones – before finishing each level, and go again and again until your score smashes through your previous personal best. Or not, of course, if you'd prefer to keep your Peggle relationship casual, and feel that luck is on your side. ■



INFO

PUB PopCap Games

DEV PopCap Games

RELEASED 2009

GET IT NOW Ebay £45-50 (bundled with the US version of Plants Vs Zombies)

NEED TO KNOW

1 PopCap's founders originally called their studio 'Sexy Action Cool'.

2 In early prototypes, the game was named Thunderball, and Thor was the protagonist.

3 Now digitally delisted, the 2014 sequel is more readily available (if not quite as good).

5

PLUS POINTS

Gotham Knights

Wayne will I, will I be famous?

1 Combat never reaches Arkham levels of smoothness, but it's punchy, with some satisfying finishers. 2 You could just play Spy Hunter instead. 3 It's worth exploring the optional team interactions for a bit more meat on the bones of their dynamic.

When the Bat-family finally got to leap out of Batman's shadow, becoming the heroes of the game rather than being sidekicks relegated to cutscenes or DLC, the result split opinion among critics and (especially) the public. If your Plus subscription is to the Extra or Premium tier, you can now see why for free.

We said it then, and we'll say it now: if you're expecting this to be an Arkham game in all but name, you're setting yourself up for disappointment. This is its own thing and, while there are clear points for criticism (such as a disappointing Gotham City, a totally unnecessary gear and crafting system,[1] and imperfect environment traversal), there's still plenty for Batfans to enjoy.

Your enjoyment really does depend on having a love for the world of Batman, but that love will be well served. Your character of choice (Batgirl, Robin, Nightwing, or Red Hood; you can swap between them back at base if you wish) is well-modelled, well-acted, well-written, and given subtly unique dialogue during cutscenes. The story has some questionable decisions when you look closely, but overall it's a good enough Batman tale.

NIGHTWING FEVER

One benefit of coming late to the game is that the two (free) extra modes are now in place. Heroic Assault allows up to four players to Bat-ter hundreds of enemies across dozens of floors, while Showdown allows two players to join forces and take on tougher versions of unlocked bosses from the main game. Not bad for free.[2]

Teaming up with a friend in the campaign is by far the best way to enjoy the game, and is how we recommend you play if you can. Short on pals with sufficient time? There *are* people playing for Quick Play, but the lack of lobbies and unpredictable nature of randos mean we advise you to stick with your Batfam when you're not playing alone.

INFO

PUB Warner Bros Games

DEV Warner Bros Games Montreal

RELEASED 2022

FOOTNOTES 1 Warner Bros refuses to learn its lesson here *cough*suicidesquad*cough*. **2** Both new modes require some progress in the campaign before you can play them.

HAVE YOUR SAY

Readers tell us what they think of our choice

"I PLATINUMED IT WHEN IT CAME OUT, GREAT GAME JUST ISN'T AN ARKHAM ENTRY SO PEOPLE BASHED IT."
Bill Guenin

"TOO MANY BETTER GAMES OUT THERE TO SPEND MY TIME ON THIS."
Gordon Craigie

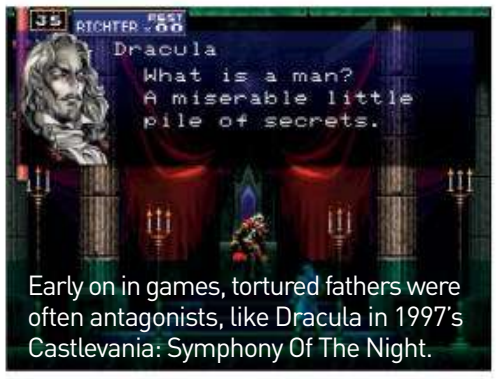
"I LIKED IT, ONCE I GOT USED TO IT. I USED BATGIRL AND NIGHTWING THE MOST."
Ed Knowles

▷ Is the force strong in **Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace**?

A BRIEF HISTORY OF

Sad dads

Does this modern phenomenon have classic roots?



Early on in games, tortured fathers were often antagonists, like Dracula in 1997's Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night.

Beset by tragedy, Yakuza's (2005) Kazuma Kiryu is the sad dad who stepped up, looking after disadvantaged kids.

Nier (2010) had two hero options in Japan, but here in the West we only got the one starring the sad dad.

In Final Fantasy X, Tidus' deadbeat dad looms large over the quest. Bioshock Infinite's Booker's motivations are unclear at first, until, bingo: he's a sad dad. **The Walking Dead's Lee grows to care for Clementine, finding a reason to keep going.**

FEELING GUILTY

Silent Hill loves trauma

Hit START and the very first Silent Hill (1999) has Harry Mason waking up following a car crash. His daughter's missing, forcing him to explore the cursed town to find her. Trauma of all stripes fuels this psychological horror series, but it often returns to grieving fathers or husbands (which is why its inversion in Silent Hill 3 feels so special). Was this the spark that ignited the sad dad flame?

HARRY RETURNED IN 2010'S **SILENT HILL: SHATTERED MEMORIES**, A REIMAGINING OF THE FIRST GAME.

Red Dead Redemption's (2010) John Marston wants a better life for his son.

Bayek and Aya set out to avenge their son in Assassin's Creed Origins (2017).

With 'Press ⊗ to Jason', Heavy Rain (2010), about a grieving father and a serial killer, became the poster child for the PS3 sad dad trend.

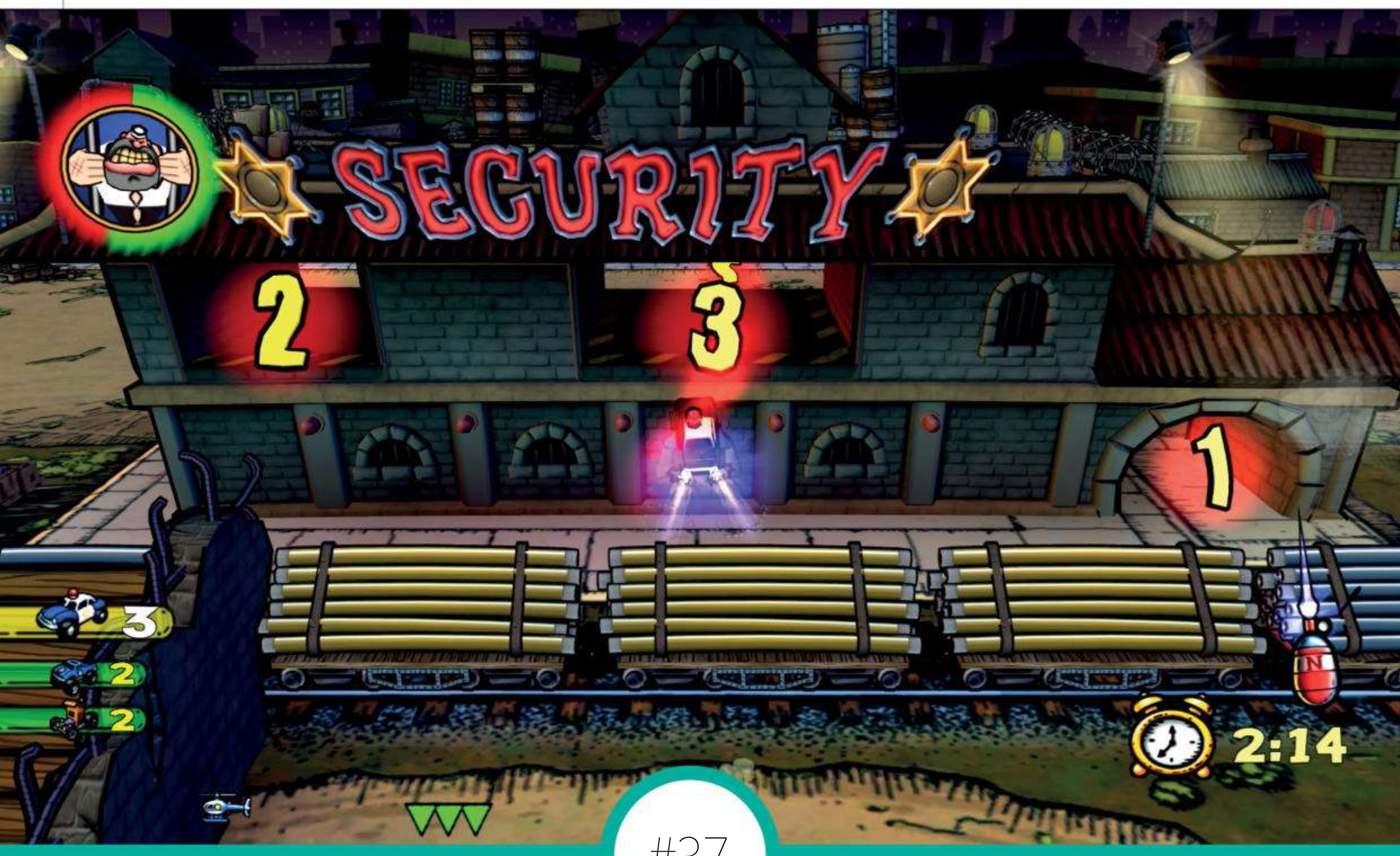
The Last Of Us' (2013) Joel becomes jaded after losing his daughter. In the end, that means growing close to Ellie, and being perhaps too overprotective.

GROW AND CHANGE

Kratos has been on a journey

Even on PlayStation 2, familial grief was a core part of Kratos' motivation. Coerced into performing atrocities by Ares, the spell is broken when he kills his own wife and child. Not until PS4 does 'angry dad' give way to 'sad dad', but most importantly we see Kratos grapple with this and move beyond it – a refreshing change.

▷ Next issue: brum, brum – **kart racers** line up on the history grid!



#37

For the three-pointer

Using a passing train to get the big points in PSN oddity **Calling All Cars!**

FORMAT PS3 / **PUB** SONY / **DEV** INCOGNITO ENTERTAINMENT / **RELEASED** 2007

Carrying a hapless criminal, a police car uses a freight train's cargo as a ramp, soaring towards the police station and dropping the felon straight into jail. It's the stuff of ultra-daft 1970s car chase movies, but it's actually the big score moment from Calling All Cars! You know, the game David Jaffe made after God Of War II.

Has there ever been a greater change in tone between one game and the next? In 2010, Jaffe himself called his early PSN title "a mistake", saying he shouldn't have chosen a cartoon look for what was actually quite a hardcore gaming experience and that, if he made it now, he would definitely reskin it. But perhaps he should look again more than a decade later. The Wacky Races aesthetic is the perfect choice for the barmy gameplay, and it's aged really well thanks to a 60fps update and even full 1080p support, which was mega-rare at the time. It even looks like a modern mobile game, pre-empting casual game visuals by several years. And even in 2007 – the era of QTEs, motion controls, and strides towards cinematic realism – some old-school gaming glee was sorely needed to bring it back to what counts: bonkers scenes like this.

Should the car be able to get its wheels up onto the train from the side? No. Should the timing window for the train passing by be so strict? Probably not. Do you feel like a boss when you do it? Absolutely.

That *dusts hands* is how you put a perp in the slammer. ■

TIME TO PLAY? This is the second level in tournament mode, so it only takes five minutes to reach this point once you can win. Then you just have to wait for the train – though actually jumping over it while carrying the perp is far easier said than done.

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Editorial
Editor **Oscar Taylor-Kent** @MrOscarTK
oscar.taylor-kent@futurenet.com – 01225 442244
Managing Art Editor **Milford Coppock**
Operations Editor **Miriam McDonald**
Games Editor **Jessica Kinghorn** @KoeniginKatze
Editorial Director, Games **Tony Mott**
Group Art Director **Warren Brown**

Contributors
Jon Bailes, Malindy Hetfeld, Alistair Jones, Luke Kemp, Daniella Lucas, Harry Shepherd, Henry Stockdale, Abbie Stone, Justin Towell, Rachel Watts, Alan Wen, Max Williams, Ben Wilson

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Account Director **Kevin Stoddart kevin.stoddart@futurenet.com**

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